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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 6 June 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Urgent and Emergency Care: Growing Towns

1. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of urgent and emergency care provision in towns with significant population growth. [905207]

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): Our recovery plan for urgent and emergency care provides £1 billion of additional funding for NHS capacity, alongside £250 million for capital improvement schemes up and down the country. Local integrated care boards are now responsible for working with their partners to decide how best to use that funding to improve services to meet the health needs of their changing populations, and all integrated care boards will shortly set out their plans for the next five years through a joint forward plan process.

Mark Pawsey: Rugby is the largest urban area within Coventry and Warwickshire that does not have its own A&E provision. In the wider region, Kettering, Shrewsbury, Redditch and Burton upon Trent all have similar or smaller populations, each with their own A&E services. Rugby is growing fast, with 12,500 homes being delivered between 2016 and 2031, when the population will exceed 135,000. Will the Minister say at what population level it will be appropriate for local health commissioners to upgrade the A&E provision at the Hospital of St Cross in Rugby?

Will Quince: As my hon. Friend knows, the provision of services, including accident and emergency, are a matter for local NHS commissioners and providers. I know that he regularly meets local NHS leaders about this matter and will continue to do so. I am very happy to meet him and, of course, visit. Funding for Coventry and Warwickshire Integrated Care Board has increased to over £1.6 billion this year. My hon. Friend is a huge champion for his constituents; I would be happy to meet and visit.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The population of my constituency is due to grow rapidly over the next 10 years and beyond. On that basis, can the Minister give a completion date for the new Whipps Cross Hospital, which was announced last week?

Will Quince: By 2030, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: And obviously we want 24-hour provision in Chorley, which has the fastest-growing population, but let us move on.

Complex Mental Health Needs: Young People

2. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the treatment and care available for young people with complex mental health needs. [905208]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): We have recruited an extra 4,500 NHS children's mental health specialists, which is a 40% increase on 2019. That is part of our additional £2.3 billion of investment into mental health services, compared to four years ago.

Sarah Green: Earlier this year, I was contacted by a mother who told me how her daughter, who has been both autistic and anorexic, has been receiving treatment since she was 13. Sadly, her condition has significantly deteriorated in that time, and it is her firm belief that closer integration of the different services she was accessing would have resulted in much better outcomes for her daughter. Will the Secretary of State consider a review of mental health services for children and young people, to look at how to better integrate services and ensure continuity of care?

Steve Barclay: I am sure the whole House is sorry to hear that her constituent's condition has deteriorated. The hon. Lady raises a very important point about integration, which is exactly the right approach. The 2022 reforms were about integrating health and social care and empowering commissioners to take a more integrated place-based approach. I am sure her local commissioners will take note of the valid point that she raises.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister for mental health.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): A 14-year old climbing out of hospital windows; a child absconding to a local railway station; a teenager with complex needs brought to A&E, requiring four police officers to spend an entire shift watching them, only for them to abscond the next day. There is a pattern here. At almost every step of the way, children needing mental health services face a perfect storm of delay and treatment in inappropriate settings, fuelled by an under-resourced service with over-stretched staff. In light of the Met's announcement that they will stop attending emergency mental health calls, is it not time for the Government to get their act together, or simply do the right thing and step aside?

Steve Barclay: One can see the way the Government are responding constructively to these issues by looking at the pilots we have been rolling out in Humberside, where police are released within one hour in 80% of section 136 detentions. We intend to roll out that pilot nationally.

The hon. Lady is right on the first part of her challenge, as demand for mental health services is increasing. In fact, there was a 41% increase in new referrals to mental health services in 2021 compared to the previous year. Where she is wrong is on the resourcing. She missed my previous answer that set out how we are committing an extra £2.3 billion of investment into mental health services, compared to four years ago.

Notices of Decision for Care Homes: Change of Ownership

3. **Taiwo Owatemi** (Coventry North West) (Lab): Whether he is taking steps to ensure that notices of decision for care homes do not lapse upon a change of ownership unless standards improve. [905209]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): When a care home is taken over, the Care Quality Commission assesses and re-rates it under its new ownership. Previous notices of decision cannot legally be passed to a new provider, but they do inform the CQC's approach to an assessment and how soon it takes place. During the time between the takeover and the CQC's carrying out a new assessment, the legacy rating is shown on the CQC website.

Taiwo Owatemi: My constituents Brenda, Gary and Trina lost their parents after they were placed in Melbourne House care home, which the CQC later deemed to be "inadequate". However, because the notice of decision lapsed on its transfer to the original owner's family, the home, now known as Earlsdon Lodge, is able to operate as if nothing had happened. Will the Minister meet my constituents and me to explain exactly why that was allowed to happen, and what is being done to prevent it from happening to other families?

Helen Whately: I shall be happy to meet the hon. Member to look into that case, because I feel strongly about the importance of ensuring that everyone has access to good, if not outstanding, care in care homes.

Sun Protection Products: Affordability

4. **Richard Thomson** (Gordon) (SNP): If he will make an assessment with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of increasing the affordability of sun protection products on levels of skin cancer. [905210]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): Last month was melanoma month and skin cancer month, and people are increasingly aware of the risks of excessive sun exposure without protection. Through the energy price guarantee and our direct support for vulnerable households, we have provided cost of living help worth, on average, £3,300 per household.

Richard Thomson: Since the early 1990s cases of skin cancer have doubled, with nearly 16,000 new cases diagnosed each year leading to 2,300 avoidable deaths annually. If some products were more affordable, more of our constituents might be able to use them and bring those numbers down. Will the ministerial team make representations to their Treasury colleagues about the Sun Protection Products (Value Added Tax) Bill, a private Member's Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) which would remove VAT from some sun protection products, so that we can start to make an impact on those appalling figures?

Neil O'Brien: As the hon. Gentleman knows, tax matters are for the Treasury, but we are absolutely committed to providing cost of living support. By the end of June the Government will have covered nearly

half a typical household's energy bill since October, so we are providing one of the most generous packages in Europe.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The last time I asked Ministers whether they would support that Bill I was told that the issue of VAT and skin cancer was a matter for the Treasury, and we have just heard a similar answer. Surely this is a matter for joined-up government. What are Ministers doing—instead of imposing more pressure and costs on the NHS—to persuade their Treasury colleagues to consider more cost-effective cost preventive measures such as making skin protection products more affordable?

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman is campaigning for a reduction in the VAT on sunscreen, but let me put this into perspective. As I have said, our cost of living support is worth, on average, £3,300 per household. That is help on a huge scale. On cancer we are taking more action across the piece, and more people are being given life-saving checks, referrals and treatment than before.

Cancer Waiting Times and Outcomes

5. **Kate Hollern** (Blackburn) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve cancer waiting times and outcomes. [905211]

7. **Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve cancer waiting times and outcomes. [905213]

16. **Holly Mumby-Croft** (Scunthorpe) (Con): What progress his Department has made on improving cancer survival rates. [905224]

19. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve cancer waiting times and outcomes. [905227]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): We are diagnosing and treating patients faster. In March, nearly three in four people were diagnosed or given the all-clear within two weeks—ahead of the 28-day target—and nine in 10 patients start treatment within a month.

Kate Hollern: In May last year I wrote to the then Health Secretary and the Prime Minister about the case of a young man in my constituency, Elliott Simpson, who was misdiagnosed with a water wart in a telephone consultation with a GP. When Elliott was finally able to see someone face-to-face, he found that he had late-stage skin cancer. He passed away on 28 April, aged just 27.

Between January and March this year, both the two-week wait target and the 62-day target were missed at East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust. Does the Secretary of State accept that delays are costing lives?

Steve Barclay: The whole House will be hugely saddened to learn of the passing of Elliott, especially at such a tender age.¹

1. [Official Report, 20 July 2023, Vol. 736, c. 16MC.]

The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of speedy diagnosis, and I was pleased that we met the faster diagnosis standard in February for the first time and again in March, with three in four patients receiving their diagnosis within two weeks and nine in 10 starting treatment within a month. She is also right to point out that there is still variation between trusts, and we are focusing on that in particular, but it is good that nationally we are hitting the faster diagnosis standard.

Mr Betts: When I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma six years ago, my GP gave me two pieces of advice: keep positive and keep active. The other day, I visited the wellbeing centre in my constituency, which is run by Sheffield Hallam University, the Sheffield Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Yorkshire Cancer Research. It is putting on a programme called Active Together to which people who are diagnosed with cancer can be referred by their consultant and have a bespoke programme of treatment involving physical activity, nutrition and psychological support to prepare them for surgery, and a programme after surgery to help them recover. Would the Secretary of State like to come to my constituency to visit this novel and innovative programme to see how it could be rolled out across the country and treat more cancers well in this way?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting and important point. How we better equip patients pre-surgery and post-surgery, how we look at their wellbeing—the keep positive bit and the social prescribing—and how we think about being active are all hugely important. I would be keen to learn more about the programme that he highlights and for either me or one of the ministerial team to follow up on his offer.

Holly Mumby-Croft: In March, the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours published its report into research funding, which found that only about £15 million of the £40 million pledged has made its way into the hands of the researchers. Can the Secretary of State set out what we can do to fix these challenges in the funding system so that we can get that money into the hands of the researchers and improve those outcomes?

Steve Barclay: I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend has raised this point, because the £40 million of funding is available. That money is there, ready to allocate to quality bids. All the bids that have met the National Institute for Health and Care Research standard have been funded, but she is right to say that there is more money available and we stand ready to work with researchers to get that money allocated as soon as those quality bids come in.

Mary Glendon: Analysis by Cancer Research UK projects that, by 2040, cancer cases will rise to over half a million new cases a year. Will the Secretary of State confirm when the NHS long-term workforce plan will be published, that it will set out transparent projections for workforce need for the next five, 10 and 15 years, and that it will be fully funded to ensure that there are enough staff to deliver timely diagnosis and treatment for cancer patients?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady is correct to say that demand for cancer services is increasing. We have seen demand up a fifth recently. That is why, alongside the long-term workforce plan, to which we are committed—the Chancellor set out that commitment in the autumn statement—we are also putting over £5 billion of investment into diagnostic centres, surgical hubs and equipment in order to better provide, alongside the workforce, the skills and equipment we need to treat cancer.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assurance can the Secretary of State give that both the letter and the spirit of section 5 of the Health and Care Act 2022 will be embraced to encourage the NHS to improve early diagnosis and therefore cancer survival rates by focusing on outcome measures such as the one-year survival rate, so that we can start catching up with international averages when it comes to survival?

Steve Barclay: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has long championed this issue. Indeed, he secured an amendment to the Health and Care Act as part of that campaign. We will be fulfilling our obligation by including an objective on cancer outcomes when we publish the next mandate to NHS England, and I hope he will see that as a welcome step.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): To improve cancer waiting times and outcomes, and learning from the success of the covid vaccine roll-out where hard-to-reach cohorts were vaccinated in everyday settings such as shopping centres and football stadiums, will my right hon. Friend look at locating more community diagnostic centres away from formal clinical settings in hospitals and taking them out into the community?

Steve Barclay: This is an innovative and exciting development, thinking about how we offer services in different ways and bring those services to patients much more locally. The community diagnostic centres are a huge step forward in that, but we should also be looking at our engagement with employers, at how we use more tests at home and at the successes we have had, for example, with some of the screening programmes in order to offer more services closer to patients.

Sir Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The figures on diagnosing people with cancer are certainly improving, but what is getting worse, and has got significantly worse in the last three months, is the starting of treatment for people who definitely have cancer. The figures are now the worst on record, with 19,000 people waiting for treatment, and all the evidence suggests that waiting another week adds 10% to the likelihood of death. Can I please urge the Minister not always to give the rosy, good statistics but to face up to the fact that there are real dangers in the statistics, too?

Steve Barclay: I know the hon. Gentleman takes a very close interest in this, and we can all see that there is a shared desire to meet the increasing demand. He recognises the progress on diagnostics. Nine in 10 patients are starting treatment within a month, and the all cancer survival index for England is steadily increasing, but I agree that there is much more still to do, which is why we are investing in diagnostic centres, surgical hubs and the long-term workforce plan. I am very happy to continue working with him and other colleagues as we meet this ongoing challenge.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the ways we can improve cancer care and outcomes is by supporting brilliant charities such as Chemocare Bags? Emma Hart and her team do an outstanding job of putting together bags, which include fluffy socks, puzzle books, colouring books, mints and lip salve, for those starting chemotherapy at Ysbyty Gwynedd in Bangor.

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all those who support Chemocare Bags for the fantastic work they do. That sort of support makes a real difference to patients, and the NHS benefits hugely from the work of volunteers, including those at Chemocare Bags.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Sir Chris Bryant) pointed out, the brutal truth is that the Tories have consistently missed England's cancer treatment target since 2013. Last year, 66,000 cancer patients waited more than two months for their first treatment following an urgent GP referral, and the UK now has the worst cancer survival rate in the G7. Labour will give the NHS the staff, the technology and the reform it needs, and we make no apologies for expecting cancer waiting times and diagnosis targets to be met once again. That is our mission. Why is theirs so unambitious?

Steve Barclay: We are making significant progress. The hon. Gentleman specifically mentions GP referrals, and there were more than 11,000 urgent GP referrals for suspected cancer per working day in March 2023, compared with just under 9,500 in March 2019, so we are seeing more patients.

Let me give an indication of how we are innovating on cancer. We have doubled the number of community lung trucks, which means the detection of lung cancer at stages 1 and 2 is up by a third in areas with the highest smoking rates. In the most deprived areas, we are detecting cancer much sooner, and survival rates are, in turn, showing a marked improvement.

Healthcare for Women

6. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve healthcare for women. [905212]

14. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve healthcare for women. [905221]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): This is the first Government to produce a women's health strategy in England. We are making huge progress on the eight priorities in our first year, from introducing the hormone replacement therapy pre-payment certificate, which is reducing the cost of HRT for women, to the £25 million roll-out of women's health hubs across the country. We will be announcing our second-year priorities in due course.

Judith Cummins: Half of all women over 50 will experience bone fractures due to osteoporosis, and many of these will be serious hip fractures. As many women will die from these fractures as from lung cancer or

diabetes. Can the Minister explain why not even one of the 63 key performance indicators set by NHS England for integrated care boards sets a target for fracture prevention?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Lady for her work in this space. She is campaigning hard on this issue. I reassure her that osteoporosis is in the women's health strategy and is a priority area for us. We are already working to make sure that women's vitamin D status is known, and to make sure that we fill gaps. NHS England is expanding fracture services for high-risk women with osteoporosis, and it is working to prevent falls. The women's health ambassador is raising the profile of osteoporosis so that women who are at higher risk can take action to prevent fractures and falls in the first place.

Sarah Owen: Women too often struggle with needless pain through standard but invasive procedures, such as hysteroscopies and intrauterine device fittings, offered without any pain relief. Our pain is being misunderstood and ignored. How much unnecessary pain must Ministers see women endure before the Government finally deliver on the pain management promised in the women's health strategy? And why is this a 10-year ambition instead of a more immediate one?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and let me also pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), who has campaigned hard in this space. I met a group of women to discuss painful hysteroscopies just a few weeks ago. This is a priority in the women's health strategy, as the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said. We are working with the royal college to update its guidelines, because a lot of these issues are associated with women's consent, the provision of information before these procedures, and women knowing that they can have them under a local or general anaesthetic and can also ask for pain control. This is not working in practice, which is why it is a priority in the women's health strategy.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Women living with HIV of course have the right to healthcare on the same terms as anyone else, except that now they do not when it comes to starting a family. Many people living with HIV are currently excluded from accessing fertility treatment, both by law and by the Government's microbiological safety guidelines. So will the Government now follow the scientific evidence, particularly on undetectable viral load, and remove what are surely discriminatory restrictions on the basis of HIV status?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee for his question, as he raises an important point. Last year, we asked the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs to reconsider this specific issue. It set up a working group in June last year to look at it and we expect its recommendations this month. We will take them seriously and address them swiftly once we have its advice.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): So many women's health issues begin with birth and pregnancy, as health is often dependent on the care and aftercare that women receive. Will my hon. Friend give the House an update

on the recruitment of midwives and maternity teams, as Gloucestershire NHS is working so hard on that, in order to fully reopen Stroud Maternity Hospital?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend, who does a huge amount of work supporting her local midwives in Stroud. I can give her encouraging news: not only have we spent £190 million on midwifery services, but we are seeing an increased number of midwives coming through midwifery training. Excitingly, we have a nurse conversion course, which takes 18 months, with NHS England paying the tuition fees for nurses to convert to being midwives. We have had 300 in training this year and we are expanding that to 500 in the next academic year. We have encouraging retention rates too, which show that midwives are not only joining the profession, but staying in it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): There is a particular group of women whose health needs should be highlighted during Carers Week: women who look after an older or disabled relative. The majority of unpaid carers in their 50s and 60s are women. Eight million unpaid carers have seen their own health suffer, with those providing high levels of care twice as likely to have poor health as people without caring responsibilities. So will the Minister finally commit to a cross-Government national carers strategy, including health issues in it, as the last Labour Government did? That is a key demand during this year's Carers Week.

Maria Caulfield: I thank the shadow Minister for her question. My colleague the Minister for Social Care is hosting an event today for carers, and £300 million for carers in the better care fund has also been released. I am a carer for my dad, who thankfully is well and spritely, so I understand the pressures of this. Recently, I met carers from Kinship; often they are grandparents, and older aunts and uncles, who look after young children. Work is going on between us and the Department for Education on how we can better support kinship carers, who do fantastic work in looking after young children. We fully recognise the issue, and the Social Care Minister is not just providing funding, but meeting those carers to see how we can better support them.

Arthritis: Treatment Waiting Times

8. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the health of patients with arthritis awaiting NHS treatment. [905214]

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): NHS England has drawn on the work of Versus Arthritis, including its joint replacement support package, in the resources it provides to support people waiting for hip and knee replacements. Alongside that, we know that what people really want is faster treatment. That is why we are working so hard to cut waiting lists, which is one of the Prime Minister's five key priorities.

Neil Coyle: I am glad that the Minister referenced Versus Arthritis, because it does great work, but it has significant concerns about the waits for treatment for people living with arthritis. While recognising the efforts of hard-working NHS staff, there are more than 800,000 people in England waiting for trauma and orthopaedic treatment, including

more than 5,500 Southwark constituents waiting for treatment at Guy's and St Tommy's hospitals. Will the Minister meet staff from Versus Arthritis specifically to discuss how to better support people waiting for those treatments?

Helen Whately: As the hon. Member said, Versus Arthritis is doing really important work not only supporting people with arthritis while they wait for treatment, but better preparing them for surgery. What is really important, as I said a moment ago, is reducing those waits and the work that we are doing on that. We have already virtually eliminated two-year waits, and 18-month waits have been reduced by more than 90%, which is quite a contrast, we know, to the performance of the Labour-run NHS in Wales. I encourage Versus Arthritis to contribute to our call for evidence on the major conditions strategy where we are looking at what more we can do to support people with, among other things, muscular skeletal conditions.

Primary Health Care Facility: East Sefton

9. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Whether he plans to provide funding for a new primary health care facility in East Sefton. [905215]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): The Government are providing record levels of capital to the NHS, with more than £24 billion allocated between 2022-23 and 2024-25, over £12 billion of which is allocated to integrated care boards themselves to invest in local priorities, including primary care facilities, of which just under £700 million has been allocated to NHS Cheshire and Merseyside integrated care board.

Bill Esterson: The Minister has just reminded us that the allocations are made by Government to integrated care boards. The problem is that, with a board the size of Cheshire and Merseyside, there are very many competing priorities. Sefton Council has secured more than £1 million from developers for a new health centre in East Sefton. The Health Secretary's recent predecessors, of which there have been many, have agreed with me that a new health centre there is a priority. Will he and his colleagues match the priority accorded to this by their predecessors, match the ambition of my constituents and support the commitment by Sefton Council and award that additional funding, so that my constituents can get that much-needed health centre in East Sefton?

Neil O'Brien: The hon. Member has been campaigning doggedly for this for several years, and I am sure that his local ICB will be strongly seized of that and the strong arguments for it. He raised the issue of developer contributions. One thing that we have done in the most recent primary care recovery plan is set further steps to increase investment from developer contributions so that we match new housing with the much-needed infrastructure, such as primary care facilities.

GP Appointments

10. **Gordon Henderson** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What progress his Department has made on increasing the number of available GP appointments. [905216]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): We are taking action to increase the workforce in general practice. We have managed to hit our target of recruiting 26,000 extra clinicians a year earlier. In fact, we have 29,000 extra clinicians in GP surgeries as well as nearly 2,000 more doctors. Of course, we will go further: as well as increasing the training of GPs to a record level—up from about 2,600 to 4,000 a year—we are also taking action to improve technology to take the burden of bureaucracy off GPs through our primary care recovery plan.

Gordon Henderson: Although I appreciate the Minister's response, Sittingbourne and Sheppey still has one of the highest patient to GP ratios in the country. Without more GPs, no initiative to increase appointments will succeed. Our local integrated care board is doing its best to bring more doctors to our area. What help can my hon. Friend give to the ICBs so that they can provide my constituents with the GPs they need?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend is quite right that we absolutely need to go further. That is why, through the primary care recovery plan, we are taking some of the pressure off general practice, investing £645 million in the new Pharmacy First service, which will free up about 10 million GP appointments a year. That is why we are investing about £60,000 per practice in new IT and modern online systems. None the less, he is totally right: we need those doctors in general practice. We have about 2,000 more now than we did in 2019, but we will go further. We have already increased GP training and we are looking at building on that further.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Can the Minister clarify when Oldham will receive its share of the 6,000 additional GPs that were promised in the Conservative 2019 general election manifesto? Today we are running with fewer GPs, and that is not helpful to anyone.

Neil O'Brien: I have already noted that we have increased the number of doctors in general practice by nearly 2,000 since 2019 alone. The number of direct patient-facing staff in general practice is 50% higher in total than in 2019, and that is up right across the country. However, of course we will go further and grow the number of clinicians in general practice, building on what we have already done.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The primary care recovery plan includes excellent measures to extend visas for international medical graduates, but can my hon. Friend say whether that extension will be automatic, answering the concerns of the Royal College of General Practitioners, and whether it will be in place for the 1,000 or so graduates coming this June and August?

Neil O'Brien: My hon. Friend modestly does not mention his role in advocating for that important reform, which will help to increase the number of highly qualified GPs coming from other countries to work in the NHS. We will ensure that that extension is automatic, so that people have extra time to make sure they get the right placement in general practice.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): There was a net loss of 577 full-time equivalent GPs last year. A contributing factor in rural communities was the Government's decision a few years ago to remove the minimum practice income guarantee, making it unsustainable for small surgeries—and many rural surgeries are necessarily small—to survive. Will the Minister consider whether it is time to reintroduce a strategic small surgeries fund, to allow smaller rural surgeries in communities such as mine to survive and thrive?

Neil O'Brien: The funding formula already takes account of rurality. I hear the hon. Gentleman's argument, but it is worth noting that our GPs are doing more than ever before. In the year to April there were nearly 10% more appointments than before the pandemic, or 20 more appointments in every GP practice per working day. GPs are working incredibly hard, as well as putting in extra staff, and I pay tribute to them for the sheer amount of work they are doing.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): The Minister recently joined me at the Thistle Moor medical centre at the heart of my constituency. Led by the inspirational Modha family, the team prioritise making face-to-face appointments available for patients by having amazing admin and support staff who speak a variety of languages. That means that, by the time the patient sees the GP, all the relevant checks have been done and the GP has all the relevant information. How can we better use admin and support staff at GP surgeries so that doctors can maximise their time and operate at the very top of their licences?

Neil O'Brien: It was an absolute pleasure to meet the Modha family and see the inspirational work happening in my hon. Friend's constituency. In our primary care recovery plan we are learning some lessons from that work, particularly about focusing GPs' time on the jobs only they can do—hence the investment in the extra 29,000 additional roles reimbursement scheme staff, the detailed plan in the primary care recovery plan to improve communication between hospitals and GPs, the cutting back of unnecessary bureaucracy, and the freeing up of resources by simplifying the investment and impact fund and the quality and outcomes framework. It is brilliant to learn from the inspirational work happening in his constituency.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Recent research from the Nuffield Trust shows that Brexit—a Brexit supported by both the Government and the Labour party, it has to be said—has worsened the shortage of NHS staff across the UK. Indeed, it has led to more than 4,000 European doctors choosing not to work in the national health services across the UK, due to higher costs, increased bureaucracy and uncertainty over visas. Can the Minister tell me whether that is one of the success stories of Brexit that we keep hearing about?

Neil O'Brien: International recruitment is up. In fact, we have 38,000 more doctors and 54,000 more nurses in the NHS than in 2010. In England at least, we are taking every step we can to draw on that international talent and we are using it to grow staffing in the NHS.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): From Sittingbourne via Bristol and Oldham, people are fed up with not being able to speak with a GP when they need to. GPs are warning that rising demand and increased costs may lead to workforce cuts or even closures. They are fed up with the bamboozling of numbers—more of which we have heard this morning—whether on GPs, full-time trainees, locums and now appointments. Whatever the metric, can the Secretary of State or the Minister tell us how many more GPs or GP appointments they think are necessary for people to access the care that they need?

Neil O'Brien: We committed in our manifesto to increasing the number and availability of appointments by 50 million. We are well on our way to meeting that target, as I have mentioned—we had 10% more appointments in the year to April than in the year before the pandemic. That is the result of the additional staffing that we are putting in: the extra 29,000 other clinicians and the nearly 2,000 more doctors in general practice. We have made that investment, but the reason why GPs are doing more appointments is not just that we have provided a fifth more funding since 2017 up to 2021; it is also that GP teams are working incredibly hard, and I pay tribute to them for all they are doing.

New Hospitals and Health Centres: Funding

11. **Luke Hall** (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide funding for new hospitals and health centres. [905217]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): We are investing record sums in the NHS estate, with more than £20 billion in the largest hospital building programme and, in addition, a further £1 billion to put an extra 5,000 bed capacity into NHS trusts, and more than £5 billion as part of our elective recovery plan, including for diagnostic centres and new surgical hubs.

Luke Hall: The Secretary of State is aware of the £30 million bid that we have submitted to redevelop Thornbury health centre. That new facility would provide GP appointments, more out-patient services, more mental health support and a proactive frailty hub to keep elderly residents in their homes for longer with the support that they need. Thornbury is a growing town and it desperately needs the new facility. Can the Secretary of State update me on the timescales for the outcome of our bid, and will he meet me to discuss it in more detail?

Steve Barclay: I know that is an extremely important scheme. My hon. Friend will know that the costs have risen considerably from when it was first proposed, and it is therefore right that we look at embracing modern methods of construction and at whether a rebuild option is the way forward. I am very happy to meet him to discuss it.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Government have failed to support the East London NHS Foundation Trust's bid for a new hospital, despite the fact that it has the capital to build the much-needed Bedford health village. We have a mental ill-health epidemic among adults and children. Does the Minister agree that it is reckless to expect my constituents to wait many months and to travel miles to access in-patient mental health services?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman might have missed in the announcement we made a couple of weeks ago that we are building three new mental health hospitals as part of the hospital building programme. That is also a part of our wider support for mental health, including the extra £2.3 billion of funding compared with four years ago.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend for the rapid progress he is making on the hospital building programme? Can he confirm that he will shortly be announcing a full and final programme of funding so that we can deliver a superb new state-of-the-art hospital in Hillingdon, where, I am proud to say, enabling works are already under way?

Steve Barclay: I am delighted to hear that the enabling works are under way. I know that my right hon. Friend has championed both Hillingdon and the new hospital building programme. I am sure that he will welcome the investment of more than £20 billion. I can confirm that Hillingdon will be fully funded. In addition to the enabling works, we are working closely with the trust to incorporate the Hospital 2.0 design into Hillingdon, as we will at Whipps Cross, as part of taking that programme forward.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): When will the Government announce capital funding for the new hospital in Lancaster: before or after 2030?

Mr Speaker: And Chorley, of course.

Steve Barclay: Chorley is extremely important, Mr Speaker—I am very sighted on that.

Our commitment is that that is part of the new hospital building programme. We said that it is part of the rolling programme, so it will not be completed by 2030 but we are keen to get work started on it, and that is exactly what we will be discussing with Members of Parliament in the weeks ahead.

Dental Recovery Plan

12. **Anthony Mangnall** (Totnes) (Con): When he plans to publish a dental recovery plan. [905218]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): Our dental plan will be out shortly. We are already taking steps to reform the contract. We have created more bands for units of dental activity, to better reflect the fair cost of work and to incentivise NHS work. We have introduced a minimum UDA value to sustain practice where it is low, allowing dentists to deliver 110% of their UDAs. As a result, the amount of dental activity being delivered is up by about a fifth on a year ago, but we know that we must go further.

Anthony Mangnall: I welcome the Minister's response and his comments in a recent Westminster Hall debate. It is clear that there is still a problem, and many of us are still asking for the recovery plan to come forward. I am afraid that "soon" is not good enough. Nearly every single one of the NHS dentists in my constituency is either not taking on new patients or leaving the area. "Soon" needs a date. Can we have this plan either immediately or sooner?

Neil O'Brien: I was seized by the thoughtful comments that my hon. Friend made in that Westminster Hall debate. We are working on all those ideas, and the plan will be out very shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. Would he consider encouraging more students to go into dental work by writing off student loans for those who go into NHS dental work for a five-year period—in other words, we get something back if we invest in them?

Neil O'Brien: At every stage, we are taking action to get more dentists doing NHS work. There are 6.5% more dentists doing NHS work than in 2010. The hon. Gentleman has an important idea. We are doing other things to retain NHS dentists, such as the important reforms that we made to pensions, which have helped both GPs and NHS dentists.

Improving Hospital Facilities

13. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): What progress he has made on improving hospital facilities. [905220]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): The Government are providing record investment in NHS hospital facilities to improve staff and patient experiences and provide extra capacity to cut waiting lists, including the more than £20 billion that we announced just under two weeks ago.

Dr Evans: I thank the Secretary of State for his serious investment in Leicestershire, with £14 million for the diagnostic centre in Hinckley and now part of that £20 billion going to Leicester Royal Infirmary, Leicester General Hospital and Glenfield Hospital, including for upgrading the car park. But there is one final part. In 2018 we had £7 million allocated to Hinckley for improvements, but due to covid and the community diagnostic centre investment, the business plan has changed to a day case unit. The money is there. Will he remove the red tape and look on this kindly and swiftly?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the series of investments that we have made in his local area. On the specific case he raises, he will know that the business case needs regional approval, and that is currently with NHS colleagues, but I am happy to commit to him that once that is received, we will look at it very keenly.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): How much of the reduced £20 billion for the 2030 new hospital programme, if any, is secured for Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust hospitals, and what are the new completion dates for building works to Charing Cross, Hammersmith and St Mary's hospitals, now that they have been removed from the list of projects to be completed by 2030?

Steve Barclay: As I set out in my statement, there are three schemes within the trust proposal. That is part of the rolling new hospital programme. We are keen to get the enabling works started as soon as possible. That includes a decant at Charing Cross to enable floor-by-floor refurbishment to proceed. We also need to discuss with

the trust potential sites for St Mary's. There is a considerable amount of work to be done, but we are keen to get that enabling work done as soon as possible.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I warmly welcome the works beginning on the new £26 million A&E facility in Swindon, hot on the heels of the £23 million urgent care and radiotherapy centres. Will the Secretary of State confirm that this is the single largest investment in Swindon healthcare facilities?

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to confirm that it is the largest investment in Swindon facilities. My hon. Friend is right to draw the House's attention to the £26 million investment in A&E and the £23 million investment in radiotherapy. It is a tribute to his championing of the need for those facilities in Swindon that the NHS has responded and this capital funding has been provided.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I have seen the wide smiles in the pictures of the Prime Minister, former Health Secretary and other MPs who have been happy to visit North Tees hospital in my constituency, where health inequalities are some of the worst in the country. They know that it is not fit for purpose, so why on earth have the Prime Minister and his Health Secretary turned their backs on the dedicated staff there and rejected their bid to replace our rundown hospital?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman seems to have missed the £12 billion record investment in capital across the NHS, the investment in the NHS app, the investment in tech—

Alex Cunningham: That is not North Tees. You cancelled it 13 years ago.

Steve Barclay: No, the technology programmes are national programmes that cover everyone, including North Tees. It is slightly odd to suggest that one place alone in the country would be exempt from a national programme; that is simply not the case. We are making record investment, including over £20 billion in the new hospital programme and 160 diagnostic centres and 43 new surgical hubs this year.

Topical Questions

T2. [905248] **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Barclay): As Health Secretary, I have been clear that deploying the latest technology and innovation is essential in order to deliver our priorities: to cut waiting lists, improve access to GPs and improve A&E performance. The NHS app is at the heart of this, including the enhancement of patient choice set out in our recent announcement, which is not available to patients in Wales. The Patients Association estimates that by enabling people to select a different hospital in the same region on the app, we can cut their waiting times by as much as three months.

We have been making major improvements behind the scenes, which are already paying off. Today, I can tell the House that between March 2022 and March of this year, there have been 6 million new registrations for

the app; repeat prescriptions via the app have increased from 1.6 million a month to 2.5 million a month; and primary care appointments made on the app have increased from 30,000 a month to 250,000, and secondary care appointment from 30,000 a month to 360,000. We continue to work to increase the app's functionality, including opening more records and test results and enabling more appointments, as part of our commitment to technology.

Mr Speaker: I think a statement would be better next time.

Sarah Owen: Brain tumours are the biggest killer for people under 40, but we are still waiting for the full £40 million that the Government promised to fund brain tumour research. In March, I raised in the House the heartbreaking experience of my constituents Yasmin and Khuram, whose daughter Amani died from a brain tumour just before her 23rd birthday. Once again, I ask whether the Minister for Health and Secondary Care or the Secretary of State will meet with me and my constituents to hear their calls for the full funding allocation to be given to researchers. That funding would be transformational for the treatment of brain tumours.

Steve Barclay: The Minister of State has met with campaigners, and I know he stands ready to have further such meetings. As we touched on earlier, the £40 million is available; obviously, that needs to be allocated to research bids of the necessary quality, and the remaining money is open to researchers to bid for. I hope they will do so.

T3. [905249] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for reconfirming the investment into North Devon District Hospital. Will he meet with me, the hospital trust and my local housing association to ensure that the housing committed to on the Barnstaple site can rapidly commence?

Steve Barclay: I am very keen to meet with my hon. Friend. I know this is an extremely important scheme for her constituency, particularly the key worker accommodation, and I look forward to having that discussion with her and the leadership of her trust.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): First, I congratulate the Health Secretary on his recent write-up as the next Leader of the Opposition. According to the *i* newspaper, his supporters are calling him "Mr Consistent". Is that because of the consistent rise in waiting lists since he became Health Secretary, the consistently longer waiting times that patients are facing, or the consistent delay to the NHS workforce plan?

Steve Barclay: The point of consistency is that we gave a manifesto commitment to have 26,000 additional roles in primary care, and we have delivered that. We made a commitment to the largest ever hospital building programme, and we have announced over £20 billion of investment in it. The Government are standing by their manifesto commitments—that is what we are delivering.

Wes Streeting: I am sure that will do it.

I want to turn to the most recent reports about the NHS workforce plan, because apparently not only is that plan delayed, but we now read in the media that it is unfunded. Labour will pay for our workforce plan by abolishing the non-dom tax status. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members do not like it, Mr Speaker, but it is the only tax they have been unwilling to put up. We have a plan, and we have said how we will pay for it. How will the Health Secretary fund his plan when it eventually arrives? Will it be cuts to the NHS, more borrowing, or even more broken promises?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is recycling this question almost as often as he recycles the non-dom funding. As I said at the last Health and Social Care Question Time, it is like the 1p on income tax that the Lib Dems used to promise, which was applied to every scheme going.

We touched on this issue at the last Question Time, and indeed at the one before: we have a commitment to a long-term workforce plan. The Chancellor made that commitment in the autumn statement, but it is a complex piece of work that NHS England is working on. It is important that we get the reforms in that plan right, and that is what we are committed to doing.

T4. [905250] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Just a couple of weeks ago, the Obesity Health Alliance launched its manifesto to tackle the high levels of diet-related ill health and the impact that has on our economy and society. Can my hon. Friend update the House on the progress being made on implementing the measures in section 172 of and schedule 18 to the Health and Care Act 2022 on the advertising of less healthy food and drink?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O'Brien): We are still committed to reducing the advertising of unhealthy food, including the junk food watershed that will be implemented in 2025. Ahead of that, we are taking action on obesity across the board, including the sugar tax, which has cut the average sugar content of affected drinks by 46%, the calorie labelling that we have on out-of-home food in cafés and restaurants, and the location restrictions on less healthy food that are coming in from October.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Kidney Research UK has published a report on the health economics of kidney disease, predicting a terrifying rise over the next 10 years. As we know, uncontrolled diabetes is the biggest cause, with Diabetes UK noting that those disproportionately most at risk are those from poverty and from south Asian and black ethnic backgrounds. Reducing health inequalities is therefore key, and it is a key ambition for the Scottish Government. It means tackling poverty in our society. What steps is the Minister's Department—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topicals.

Martyn Day: It is topical because the research was just published yesterday.

Mr Speaker: The question cannot go on forever; let us get an answer.

Neil O'Brien: I had a useful conversation with the Scottish public health Minister where we discussed many of these issues. We are providing huge cost of living support—some of the most generous in Europe, worth £3,300 a household—and taking action across the piece. Whether it is smoking or obesity, we are tackling the underlying causes of the health inequalities that the hon. Gentleman mentions.

T8. [905255] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Under the Human Rights Act, do the Government not have a duty of care to deal with the housing of illegal migrants? How can the Government ensure the health of 2,000 migrants cooped up in the former RAF Scampton? In particular, how will they ensure their health given the fact that the site is riddled with asbestos and contamination from 100 years of RAF usage? I see a case coming to the European Court of Human Rights.

Steve Barclay: Clearly, an increase in population in a specific area will have an impact on the health needs there. I recognise the concern that my right hon. Friend raises, and I will ask the Minister for Primary Care and Public Health to follow up with him on this important point. While the NHS is well equipped to deal with short-term pressures, this issue highlights the importance of the Prime Minister's commitment to stop the boats and the Government's overall strategy on illegal migration.

T5. [905251] **Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): As chair of the all-party parliamentary health group, I have been hearing so much about the importance of artificial intelligence innovation in mental health, and I was pleased to launch the AVATAR2 clinical trials in three universities across the UK. Will the Secretary of State commend this progress being made in digital innovation? It deserves scrutiny, but can make much progress.

Steve Barclay: I very much welcome it. I am delighted to hear that constructive approach to AI from the hon. Lady. The importance of AI is why we have been funding more than 80 AI lab schemes with more than £130 million. AI has huge potential to help patients. We are seeing that, for example, in stroke patients getting care much quicker. She is right that there are also some regulatory and other issues that we need to address, but we should not miss the opportunities of AI, and she is right to highlight them.

T9. [905256] **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): Last week, not a single dentist across the city of Southend said that they were taking on new NHS patients, which is concerning for my constituents. Can my hon. Friend confirm again what steps he is taking to make sure that my constituents get the NHS dental treatment that they deserve?

Neil O'Brien: This is absolutely the top priority I am working on at the moment. I am totally seized of the challenge that my hon. Friend mentions. I have mentioned some of the reforms we are already making, which have

increased dental activity by about a fifth in the year to March, but we know that we have to go further and we will do so shortly.

T6. [905252] **Nadia Whittome** (Nottingham East) (Lab): More than one in 10 social care roles are vacant, and the biggest culprit in this recruitment and retention crisis is low pay. According to recent TUC analysis, a £15 an hour minimum wage for care workers would not only tackle staff shortages, but level up places such as the east midlands, introducing an £800 million economic boost. Will the Government introduce that?

The Minister for Social Care (Helen Whately): I want to see the care workforce recognised and rewarded for the work that they do. That is one reason why we gave adult social care a record uplift to its funding of up to £7.5 billion in the autumn statement, for local authorities to fund care providers to pay their workforce in turn. That goes hand in hand with our workforce reforms to develop the skills and career opportunities for the care workforce.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State read the report "Safe and Effective?" produced in April by a group of senior clinicians, which is very critical of the work of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency? If he has not yet read it, will he do so, please?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I feel that we had a very productive meeting yesterday with the all-party parliamentary group on covid-19 vaccine damage about the vaccines for covid and the issue of the MHRA. He raised a number of important points during that meeting, including that on the MHRA, and I will be responding to him shortly.

T7. [905253] **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): One of my constituents with complex health needs has struggled to get GP appointments for years now. On one occasion when they could not get an appointment, they had to resort to taking out-of-date medicine. Last week, they phoned every morning at 8 am, before finally getting just a telephone appointment. When will the Government finally fix the crisis in primary care and make sure that everyone gets access to a GP appointment?

Steve Barclay: As the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, said earlier, through the primary care recovery plan we have specific measures to tackle things such as the pressure at 8 am, particularly on a Monday morning. There is the investment in digital telephony, with call-back features, and online booking, as well as the channel shift to enable pharmacists to do more and to prescribe more, the use of the NHS app and the review of 111. There is a range of initiatives that we are taking to address the increased demand. Ultimately, GPs are seeing more patients—up to 10% more patients—but there is more demand, and that is how we are meeting it.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering General Hospital is aiming to submit its final business case for its £34 million net zero energy centre in December, but has been told that when it does so, it can expect at least a 13-week wait for approval. The Secretary of State has been good enough to see for himself the urgent need for this new power plant. Is there anything he can do to speed up this process?

Steve Barclay: I share my hon. Friend's desire for us to move at pace on the scheme. As he says, I have seen at first hand the importance of the scheme at Kettering, and I stand ready to work constructively with him to expedite that case, because I do not think anyone is in any doubt of the importance of the work at Kettering. It is a huge tribute to him and the way he has championed the case for Kettering that it was such a central part of the new hospital programme announcement.

Simon Lightwood (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): In Wakefield, I am pleased to say that our campaign to save our city centre walk-in service has been successful, but every day people are still struggling to get a GP appointment. The latest NHS statistics show that, in April, 12,586 people waited more than 28 days. Quite simply, there are not enough fully qualified GPs. Labour has a workforce plan that is ambitious and costed. Where is the Government's delayed and fully funded workforce plan?

Neil O'Brien: I have already mentioned that we have nearly 2,000 more doctors in primary care than we did in 2019, as well as the early delivery of the 26,000 extra clinicians we have brought into primary care. *[Interruption.]* The Opposition may not want to hear it, but the truth is that we have increased funding for general practice by about a fifth in real terms. We have more doctors and other clinicians, and GPs are doing 10% more appointments every month. We want to continue to build on that, which is why we have the primary care recovery plan and why we have invested a further £645 million in enabling people to get treatment from their pharmacists, freeing up 10 million more GP appointments. We know we must go further, but we are making progress.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I know the Minister is very keen to see the numbers of elective waits fall, and they have been falling. My constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme share that aim. So will he welcome the local hospital trust opening not only a new modular theatre for specialised hand surgery, but a central treatment suite for day patients at the County Hospital in Stafford funded by NHS England's elective recovery plan, which will help cut waits for planned procedures?

The Minister for Health and Secondary Care (Will Quince): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has articulately and eloquently set out the improvements being made at Stafford County Hospital, and he has been a strong champion for those works. This is real, visible, positive change that will benefit both residents and patients in Newcastle-under-Lyme and the surrounding areas.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): My constituent Brian Murray lost his wife Roberta six years ago, following years of chronic health conditions

after an infected blood transfusion. He wants to know: when will the Government enact all of the recommendations regarding compensation from the second report by Sir Brian Langstaff?

Maria Caulfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We take this issue very seriously, and we have already made interim payments to those infected. The Minister for the Cabinet Office came to the Dispatch Box in April when Brian Langstaff's review was published, and we are working night and day to respond to those recommendations and get that plan out as soon as possible. We recognise the impact on families, and on those infected and affected.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Today Dr Mike McKean, a respiratory consultant and vice-president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said that vaping is "fast becoming an epidemic" among children. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health said that we should ban disposable cigarettes—e-cigarettes—"without a doubt". Will the Minister do all he can to prevent children from starting vaping, and will he back my ten-minute rule Bill, which was first introduced in this place in February, to ban disposable e-cigarettes?

Neil O'Brien: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and her leadership on this issue. Many of the ideas that she has been putting forward are already in the plan that we set out to tackle youth vaping, including the creation of the "flying squad", the ongoing call for evidence on youth vaping, and all the different things we could do to continue to drive it down.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The non-surgical breast cancer service in South Yorkshire is facing a critical shortage of oncologists. The shortage is so severe that patients are being told to expect months between referral and appointment. What immediate steps are the Government taking to ensure that patients, no matter their postcode, see a specialist as soon as they need to do so?

Steve Barclay: As reflected in the fact that we met the faster diagnosis standard in February and March for the first time, we are investing more in our cancer services to meet the recognised increase in demand. That is why more patients are being treated sooner and survival rates are improving. I am happy to look at any variation at a local level because of workforce pressure, but the diagnostic centres and surgical hubs are all part of our response to the increase in cancer demand.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): A number of dentists across north Staffordshire are stopping NHS treatment, which is extremely concerning. Some of my constituents have reported that they are being told they will have to pay either £120 a year or £14 a month to stay on the books. Will my hon. Friend look into those serious concerns and meet me to discuss the matter further?

Neil O'Brien: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss those important issues further.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I recently learned that my local integrated care board is not allowed to spend the money it wants to spend on securing the best location for a new GP practice and health centre. The reason is that Treasury rules, which are used by the District Valuer Services, are not keeping up with market rents. Will the Secretary of State speak to his colleagues

in the Treasury to fix that, before we face an epidemic of health centres and GPs leaving town and city centres, and moving to ring-road locations away from the populations they serve?

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to look at that specific issue and raise it with Treasury colleagues.

Point of Order

12.37 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You were in the Chair yesterday when the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities expressed his enthusiasm for the publication of impact assessments for new legislation. The Renters (Reform) Bill is awaiting Second Reading, and there are two impact assessments, neither of which have yet been made available to Members of the House. What can be done to ensure that they are made available before we have Second Reading?

Mr Speaker: The good thing is that you have certainly put that on the record. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench are listening carefully, and will be knocking at your door when you get back. I would expect those impact studies to be made available.

BILL PRESENTED

PETS (THEFT AND IMPORTATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Richard Foord, Ed Davey, Wendy Chamberlain, Sarah Olney, Munira Wilson, Christine Jardine and Wera Hobhouse, presented a Bill to prevent and punish the theft of dogs and to deter the unlawful importation of certain animals into Great Britain; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 317).

Care Supporters

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.38 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for a right for a user of health and care services to be accompanied by a care supporter; and for connected purposes.

The care of a loved one is not an optional extra; it is an absolutely central part of dignified care. Separation and isolation have a deeply harmful impact on individuals, but particularly on those who are vulnerable. For those who are approaching the end of life, the impact cannot be understated. My Bill seeks to recognise those fundamental points, and put them into law.

Throughout the pandemic, guidance proved consistently inadequate. It applied with levels of uncertainty and variability that led to a postcode lottery as separate settings interpreted it differently. There is a clear lack of recourse when guidance is applied incorrectly as well as a wide power imbalance between service users and care providers. Those problems will not be solved through further tweaks to guidance.

Past practice has shown that older and disabled people, those affected by dementia, stroke and other impairments, and those with a mental or physical disability are some of the most powerless people in our society. They often do not have the ability to challenge decisions made at care homes or in hospitals. In the worst circumstances—these are not uncommon—they cannot defend themselves against abuse, neglect or inhumane conditions.

The devastating impact of all of that affects not only those in receipt of care but their loved ones. Further, poor-quality data on visiting means that we cannot appreciate the true scale of the problem. Data does not capture where visits are allowed only for a short period of time, where young people are disallowed from visiting or where people cannot see parents, husbands or wives directly in their rooms. There is also a principle at stake: do we as a society give the right to state or private institutions—namely, hospitals and care homes—to deny us contact with family and loved ones because they are in receipt of their care, or do we believe that we should keep our right to maintain contact with loved ones regardless of health and care needs? I think it is obvious. I firmly believe that we should make a clear choice of the latter and enshrine that right in law in this House.

There is a dangerous hangover of restrictions from covid and a lack of urgency from the Government to change things. The need for the Bill is therefore as pivotal as it was during the pandemic.

Before I turn to the steps that I have taken to put this measure into law, I pay tribute to the determined efforts of campaigning organisations in this area: in particular, the Rights for Residents campaign group and the Relatives and Residents Association, which have merged to become Care Rights UK, and John's Campaign. The work of Jenny Morrison, Diane Mayhew, Helen Wildbore, Julia Jones, Nicci Gerrard and Kate Meacock has been inspirational. They are all in the Public Gallery watching our proceedings. I also place on record my appreciation to the hon. Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey

[Dan Carden]

Crouch) and for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), who have supported the campaign from its origin. Quite simply, I would not be introducing the Bill if it were not for their collective efforts; I thank them all for that.

In November 2021, I tabled an amendment to the Health and Care Bill that aimed to guarantee visiting rights to hospitals and care homes. The amendments were not moved, but I hoped that the Department would take note. Many people across the country spent the winter of 2021 separated from those most important to them. In March 2022, we invited those affected to an event where they could share their experiences with parliamentarians. The testimonies that we heard were harrowing and the collective trauma was palpable. That powerful event left those present united in the view that a legal right was needed to secure the right of care users to nominate an individual to provide support or care in all circumstances.

Many at the event were disappointed by the following inaction from Government. None the less, following it, 60 Members signed a letter to the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), who was at that point Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, pushing for a legal right to be put into law. We were again left disheartened by the Department's response, which prescribed updated guidance as the solution to any problems. However, we pressed on.

In October last year, in response to our Backbench debate, the Minister for Social Care, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), stated that she did not

“consider the status quo acceptable”—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2022; Vol. 721, c. 494.]

and that she was “on the case.” Those words, with the promise of action, meant a lot to those affected. Campaign groups waited to see what shape that promised action would take and I trust the Minister for Social Care has been working on the issue. She attended our meeting this morning to meet campaigners. I say to her that we now need to see action.

It is important to remember that the denial of contact has not just taken place in care homes, but in hospitals too—I can account for that from personal experience. Therefore, any legislative response must address both sides of the health and social care system. I hope that those on the Treasury Bench will hear this point. It is not just colleagues in the House but more than 70 organisations across the sector who are pressing for action in this area: Mencap, the Alzheimer's Society,

Mind, Age UK, Care UK, Healthwatch—the list goes on. We have support from all parties across the House. In fact, I have witnessed few other issues on which there has been such universal agreement in the House.

There are only a few months left of this parliamentary Session. We expect the King's Speech in autumn and a general election next year. It is clear that the time to act is now. Will the Government commit to legislating for a care supporter in the next King's Speech? Will all major parties commit to putting this legal right into their manifestos? We have a Bill ready to be implemented. I thank Tom Gillie from Matrix Chambers and Carolin Ott from Leigh Day for their hugely valuable work on the draft legislation. Let me quickly outline how the Bill would operate in practice.

The Bill would place a duty on health and care providers to allow a service user to be accompanied by a care supporter. A care supporter is defined as a person nominated as such by the service user. Importantly, the right would attach to the service user, and only following their clear and informed consent. The Bill places a duty on providers to allow unrestricted in-person support from at least one essential care supporter, nominated by the service user. The Bill also provides safeguards for those exceptional circumstances in which the duty on providers would not apply. The Bill provides alternatives if the care supporter's face-to-face access is entirely excluded. The provider would then have to take reasonable steps to facilitate contact by other means. Finally, the Bill would also provide means for appeal and proper enforcement, two measures that are currently almost impossible for those trying to maintain contact with their loved ones in care settings. As always, I stand ready to work with the Government on any steps that can be taken to make the Bill as effective as possible.

No one in this House was left untouched by the trauma of the coronavirus pandemic. We can all agree on the principle that whether it is the state, a privately run care home or a hospital, it does not have the right to separate us from our family and loved ones. We must now take the opportunity to learn from that trauma and bring in legislation.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dan Carden, Tracey Crouch, Daisy Cooper, Liz Saville Roberts, Marsha De Cordova, Caroline Lucas, Alicia Kearns, Hilary Benn, Maria Eagle, John Nicolson, Dame Caroline Dinenege and Steve Brine present the Bill.

Dan Carden accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 November, and to be printed (Bill 318).

Committee on Standards

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 149(14)),

That this House:—

(1) approves the Ninth Report of the Committee on Standards, HC 1276;

(2) endorses the recommendation in paragraph 40; and

(3) accordingly suspends Margaret Ferrier from the service of the House for a period of 30 days, beginning on Wednesday 7 June 2023.—(*Fay Jones.*)

12.49 pm

The House divided: Ayes 185, Noes 40.

Division No. 245]

[12.49

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie
Aldous, Peter
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, rh Jonathan
Barker, Paula
Baron, Mr John
Bell, Aaron
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Bob
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blomfield, Paul
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Ms Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Sir Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Cadbury, Ruth
Callaghan, Amy (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Clark, Feryal (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Marcus Jones*)
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
David, Wayne
Davies, Dr James
Davies-Jones, Alex
Davison, Dehenna
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dixon, Samantha
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doogan, Dave
Dorans, Allan (*Proxy vote cast by Brendan O'Hara*)
Doughty, Stephen
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Farris, Laura
Farron, Tim
Farry, Stephen
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Stephen
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Green, rh Damian
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Dame Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hall, Luke
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Johnston, David
Jones, Darren
Jones, Ruth
Jupp, Simon
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leadbeater, Kim
Levy, Ian

Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lightwood, Simon
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
Loughton, Tim
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart
Malcolm
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Mills, Nigel
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morris, James
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murray, James
Nici, Lia
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Pennycook, Matthew
Penrose, John
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Skidmore, rh Chris
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Sobel, Alex
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Tami, rh Mark
Tarry, Sam
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Tomlinson, Justin
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Mr Robin
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, Hywel
Wishart, Pete
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

Julie Marson and
Steve Double

NOES

Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bridgen, Andrew
Bristow, Paul
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cash, Sir William
Chope, Sir Christopher
Crosbie, Virginia
Davis, rh Mr David
Dines, Miss Sarah
Drax, Richard
Firth, Anna
Hanvey, Neale
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Sally-Ann
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Jenkinson, Mark
Jones, rh Mr David
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kruger, Danny
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
MacAskill, Kenny
Mackinlay, Craig
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
McCartney, Karl
Morrissey, Joy
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Robinson, Gavin
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Stewart, rh Bob
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Walker, Sir Charles

Tellers for the Noes:

Sammy Wilson and
Jim Shannon

Question accordingly agreed to.

BRITISH NATIONALITY (REGULARISATION OF PAST PRACTICE) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Bill—

Timetable

(1)(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Proceedings on Second Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(c) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion five hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3)(a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chair or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair or Speaker for separate decision;

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other Questions, other than the Question on any motion described in paragraph (15)(a) of this Order.

(5) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chair or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(6) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chair or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(8)(a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(9) Paragraphs (2) to (7) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (8) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(10)(a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (5) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(13) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(14) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(15)(a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a Motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(16)(a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(17)(a) The start of any debate under Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) to be held on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall be postponed until the conclusion of any proceedings on that day to which this Order applies.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings in respect of such a debate.

(18) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(19)(a) Any private business which has been set down for consideration at a time falling after the commencement of proceedings on this Order or on the Bill on a day on which the Bill has been set down to be taken as an Order of the Day shall, instead of being considered as provided by Standing Orders or by any Order of the House, be considered at the conclusion of the proceedings on the Bill on that day.

(b) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to the private business so far as necessary for the purpose of securing that the business may be considered for a period of three hours.—(*Fay Jones.*)

British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Bill

Second Reading

1.2 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill seeks to address a technical legal issue identified by the Home Office with a long-standing policy that operated from 1983 until the early 2000s under successive Governments of both parties, relating to the criteria for determining whether European economic area nationals living in the UK during that period were “settled”.

The concept of settlement is important. The British Nationality Act 1981 defines it as being ordinarily resident in the UK and without restriction on the period for which one may remain, and it is also referred to as “free from immigration time restrictions”. As many Members will know, the Act introduced changes for acquisition of citizenship, shifting from a “birth on soil” approach to a requirement for at least one parent to be British or settled in the UK at the time of the birth. Thus the issue of whether or not an individual is settled has a knock-on effect on the citizenship of any children born to that individual in the United Kingdom.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thoroughly welcome the Bill. I have a constituent who falls into this category. She had to prove her nationality, although, having lived here for 33 years—this is the only country she ever knew, and English is the only language she has ever spoken—she did not even know that she was not British until she had to apply for a passport. She was estranged from her mother, and therefore found herself having to have very painful conversations with a family member to prove that she was what she had always thought she was. Does the Minister agree that the Bill will sort out issues of that kind?

Robert Jenrick: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady. The Home Office would argue that her constituent has always been British and should be considered so, but there has been a degree of legal doubt following the recent case, so it was right that we brought forward this legislation at the earliest opportunity and that it is retrospective, so that all constituents who have been concerned can know that, clearly in law, they are and have always been British citizens.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly welcome this piece of legislation. I have a constituent whose son falls into this category and it was frankly alarming for him to be told that his citizenship was in jeopardy. It is really good that the Government have acted so swiftly and I urge everyone in the House to support this legislation. I hope that we will see it on the statute book as soon as possible.

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. She has raised the case to which she referred with me to represent her constituent. As she says, being a citizen of this country is an important and special status, and nobody should be in doubt about whether that is truly legally sound. The Bill puts that beyond doubt, and I am pleased that we have been able to do this expeditiously. I am grateful for her support and, I suspect, that of Members on both sides of the House today.

[Robert Jenrick]

During the period from 1 January 1983 to 1 October 2000, individuals lawfully exercising a free movement right in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland—for example, as workers—were considered by the Home Office to be free from immigration time restrictions. Consequently, they were treated as settled for nationality purposes and any children born to them during that period were regarded as British citizens. This interpretation was supported by Home Office policy documents and guidance.

However, as I have just referenced, recent litigation, while not directly challenging that historical approach, has exposed a legal technicality suggesting that it was not correct and that EEA nationals in exercise of a free movement right were not in fact settled, as their residence should always have been deemed subject to immigration time restrictions. This has understandably led to concerns about the citizenship status of individuals born in the UK in the relevant period to parents exercising a free movement right who had always thought themselves to be British and been treated as such by successive Governments. Given the passage of time and the volumes of people potentially affected, the House will appreciate that this uncertainty is not something that we wish to countenance.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Hopefully the Bill will proceed with support from both sides. On a directly related matter, the Minister will be aware that there are thousands of citizens across the United Kingdom, many of them in Northern Ireland, who were born a few miles across the border in the Irish Republic after 1948 but who are currently not allowed to get a British passport. Technically, even though they reside in the UK, have lived in the UK for decades, are taxpayers in the UK and vote in the UK, they cannot get a British passport without naturalising at a cost of £1,300. They have the support of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of this House and they have cross-community support in Northern Ireland. Once the passage of this Bill has concluded, will the Minister undertake to look again at this matter, revise it, and hopefully come forward with a proposition that will alleviate the problem?

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. This is an issue that I am aware of and I would be happy to have a further conversation with him and to give it further thought. We want a fair system whereby British citizenship is available to all those who are naturalised and who have lived here for sustained periods, and a system that is as accessible as possible.

To continue the point I was making, legislating quickly and proactively to provide reassurance is the right thing to do. The Bill will operate by confirming in law the previous policy position. This will protect the nationality rights of people born in the UK to parents who were considered settled on the basis of exercising a free movement right and those who registered or naturalised as British citizens based on that policy. The Bill also clarifies when EEA nationals could be considered settled on the basis of exercising an equivalent right in Jersey, Guernsey or the Isle of Man, which are part of the United Kingdom for nationality purposes. It is right that this approach is adopted in those locations to

ensure that no one loses out on a citizenship right to which they have a reasonable expectation of being entitled, based on published policy and operational practice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Like my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), I fully support and welcome the Bill.

I am not sure whether the Minister is aware that, last week, a former leader of Sinn Féin said that, when Unionists talk to Sinn Féin about a united Ireland, it would be Sinn Féin and the Republic of Ireland that would be handing out British passports. I am very proud to have a British passport and the benefits it brings, so will the Minister put it clearly on the record today that people born in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will have a British passport; that it will be the Minister, the Government and the Department that will be handing out those passports; and that Sinn Féin and the Republic of Ireland Government will never hand out a British passport to any citizen, and nor should they?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and he is right to make that point. I will restate it for him, if that would be helpful.

I want to be clear that the Bill is not about creating new British citizens. These are people who have always considered themselves to be British, and whom successive Governments have also considered as such. They may have lived here, worked here, had children here and organised their lives based on policy published under both Conservative and Labour Governments confirming that they are British. It is essential that we provide them with legal certainty as to their citizenship status as soon as possible, so they can continue their lives in our country with the same rights and entitlements they have always enjoyed.

I think we can all agree that this short but important Bill seeks to do the right thing by putting the citizenship status of affected individuals beyond doubt, and I urge all colleagues on both sides of the House to support its quick passage.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

1.12 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for that introduction and overview of the Bill. It is not often that I find myself in full agreement with him but, in this case, I am very pleased to say that we are on the same page. I am used to sparring with him—verbally, of course—on a range of topics on which we have not always seen eye to eye, but the Opposition welcome the Bill and the Government's commitment to its expedited passage.

This is a narrow piece of legislation that addresses a specific issue. Its purpose is not to implement any changes in legal entitlements to British citizenship but, rather, to codify in primary legislation what has been the established position of successive Governments of both parties. As such, we have not seen any reason to table amendments and we are happy to work with the Government to facilitate the Bill's swift passage and implementation.

The Bill covers individuals born in the UK to parents from EU countries between 1983 and 2000. It codifies their right to citizenship, in line with successive Governments' understanding of the British Nationality Act 1981. Many of these people will have held a British passport for many years. However, recent litigation in the Roehrig case raised potential problems for those applying for a passport for the first time. The explanatory notes suggest that only a small number of first-time applications have been made, which the Home Office placed on hold in October 2022, as a result of the Roehrig case. The Government's position is that the Passport Office will be able to move forward with those applications once this Bill takes effect. Beyond that, the total number of people who may be covered by this legislation remains unclear. According to the equality impact assessment:

"no official figures exist to highlight the scale of the cohort impacted. However, we have combined data from two sources to reach the conclusion that there were in the region of 167,000 children born to EEA mothers between 1983 and 2000".

So I want to ask the Minister a few questions. I totally understand if he cannot answer all of them now, but it would be useful for the House to have some clarification. I reiterate that we are ready to support the Government in moving this Bill through Parliament as quickly as possible. My questions are primarily on issues of implementation, on which further detail of the Government's plans would be helpful to the House. Given the substantial gaps in the official data available, does the Home Office have any plans to work with the Office for National Statistics to carry out further research on the number of people who may be affected, particularly in terms of first-time applicants for a British passport?

Secondly, the explanatory notes state that once the Bill is enacted, the Home Office will be in a position to resume the processing of passport applications placed on hold in October last year. Will the Minister confirm that that means the Passport Office will restart the decision-making process immediately upon the Bill's entry into force? Thirdly, what steps does the Home Office plan to take to ensure that the individuals affected are provided with access to advice and support on their rights and, where relevant, on what action they may need to take to obtain confirmation of their citizenship status and whether and how they may need to apply for a passport? Fourthly, for those who have already applied for their passport and others who may wish to do so, will the Minister confirm whether there will be any expedited procedures to process such applications without any further delays? Finally, will he clarify the Government's position on any fees that may be payable and whether there are any plans to waive fees for the applicants in question? I feel that in the coming months Members from both sides of the House may well come across some of those issues in their constituencies, and I am sure everyone would find it helpful to have that information on those points. As I say, the Opposition support this Bill and are happy to facilitate its rapid passage through Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

1.17 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I, too, do not seek to detain the House for long on this Bill. It is a rare day indeed when I agree with something that the

Immigration Minister is bringing forward—let us get that point down and hope we never return to it again. *[Laughter.]*

The SNP welcomes the Bill for the clarity it will bring, particularly given the confusion that has been caused by different approaches taken by the Home Office on the question of what "settled" means in the context of free movement. I am reassured by the briefing that we received from the Project for the Registration of Children as British Citizens, the 3million, the Immigration Law Practitioners Association and Amnesty International, which also welcomes the Bill. The way in which the Home Office has consulted with them on it is welcome and something the Home Office ought to be doing more often. The briefing states:

"We are grateful to the Home Office for consulting with us immediately prior to this Bill's introduction. Nonetheless, the history of this matter provides a further example of our concerns that British citizenship, and British nationality law from which the right to citizenship is derived, has been badly mistreated by successive Governments over a period of some decades. This is but one stark example."

So before the Government get too much into slapping themselves on the back for this Bill, they should be cognisant of the fact that many issues associated with citizenship remain, many of which we will see in our surgeries, as local MPs.

I do not seek to reiterate what others have said, but I am concerned at the lack of official statistics identified in the equality impact assessment. It mentions 167,000 children born to EEA mothers between 1983 and 2000, but there are an unknown number of grandchildren also in this cohort. So what further work are the Government doing both to identify these people to let them know what their rights are and what they should do, and to make sure that Home Office and Passport Office officials who are making the decisions are also very clear about the situation. The lack of clarity over this has been a real problem. It should be the case that everybody, when applying for their first passport, knows that they are doing so properly and have the right to do so to avoid any confusion. There is nothing worse than people applying for passports and then there being an unexpected delay in the process. We are coming into that season where we will get those kinds of inquiries.

I understand from the Library briefing that the Home Office had stopped issuing first-time British passports to people affected by this, so it would be useful to hear from the Minister exactly how many people are in this paused group and what will be happening now to ensure that they get their passports. I expect that there has been some delay involved as a result of that passport being paused—people will not have been able to travel or do the things that they wanted to do and they will want to know when they will get those passports once the process restarts. It would be useful to have a picture of exactly how many people are affected, and I am sure that the Passport Office will have those figures.

I also note that the equality impact assessment references "The Windrush Lessons Learned Review" of Wendy Williams. This uncertainty around status speaks to some of the difficulties caused for the Windrush generation, but as the UK Government have ditched some of their commitments on upholding the principles from the review, can we be assured that the confusion that has led up to this point will not be recreated in a new EEA

[Alison Thewliss]

Windrush? People who have the right to be here, who have settled status, and who have the right to apply for a British passport should face no further impediment or confusion in applying for their passport.

In closing, there is a lot more that the Government need to do to improve the processes around citizenship and applying for passports and to make sure that there is a clearer, simpler, cheaper and more effective route to citizenship in the UK. I am certain that an independent Scotland will seek to make that route much clearer, much simpler and better so that people have the right to be here and can fully participate as Scottish citizens in an independent Scotland, and I look forward to that day.

1.21 pm

Robert Jenrick: I am grateful to the hon. Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for their support for the Bill. Hopefully, this spirit of unity will be contagious for other legislation shortly to return to the House.

Let me reply to the specific and valid questions. First, on statistics, I will not repeat the numbers that the hon. Gentleman raised. Those are the best assessment that the Home Office currently has. We do not have a plan to ask the ONS, or any other body, to do further, deeper research. We do not feel that that is necessary, primarily because, by virtue of this piece of legislation, the rights of those British citizens will be confirmed. It will be retrospective, so those individuals should not need to do anything now, other than the small category of individuals whose passport applications were paused. We will need people at the Home Office and the Passport Office to process those applications as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked how many applications had been paused. As of 26 May, 95 passport applications were on hold. We are in communication with those affected to keep them updated. Once the legislation passes, it will be beyond doubt that they are British citizens in law and have always been so and we will be able to proceed with their passport applications. I will ask the Passport Office to process their applications expeditiously, so that any inconvenience they may have been put through can be resolved as quickly as possible. There will not be a need for them to pay any additional fee beyond what they have already paid, which will be the normal fee for a British citizen renewing their passport or applying for a first-time passport.

Alison Thewliss: When I have experienced casework delays with the Department for Work and Pensions, a consolatory payment is sometimes offered to people where there have been extensive delays. Given that only 95 people are involved, would that be appropriate in this case?

Robert Jenrick: We have not considered that, and I do not think it is necessary. We are of course sorry that those individuals have been inconvenienced; that was never the Home Office's intention, either today or in the past. This litigation was unexpected and we have set out to remedy it as quickly as possible. I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that we have brought forward this legislation quickly and, as she rightly noted, we have tried to consult relevant stakeholders so that there are good communications prior to its introduction.

The hon. Lady also mentioned Windrush; that is a very serious situation, but is a quite a different situation from the one we find ourselves in here. In this legislation we are reflecting a position that has existed in policy and guidance for several decades. We have responded quickly to implement the legal change necessary, following the court case heard in October last year, to provide that certainty. As I said in my opening remarks, we are not creating any new British citizens here, but recognising the citizenship of that cohort in law whom we had always believed existed and reflected in policy.

We remain absolutely committed, of course, to righting the wrongs of Windrush, whether through the Windrush compensation fund or more broadly, as she referred to, through ensuring that the Home Office makes good on its commitments to the Wendy Williams review. That is something we take very seriously.

In terms of any other impacts upon the individuals concerned here, there should be none. Once we have processed the remaining passport applications, those British citizens can and should continue with their lives as previously. We will ensure that Home Office staff, Passport Office personnel and any relevant stakeholders are properly trained so that, should people come forward with concerns in the weeks, months or years ahead as a result of this case, we can reassure them that, once this has been settled in law, they are and have always been British citizens.

I hope that responds to all the points made. With that, I shall conclude my remarks.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

British Nationality (Regularisation of Past Practice) Bill

Considered in Committee (Order, this day)

[DAME ROSIE WINTERTON *in the Chair*]

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I remind hon. Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as Deputy Speaker. Please use our names. Madam Chair, Chair, Madam Chairman or Mr Chairman are also acceptable.

Clause 1

IMMIGRATION RESTRICTIONS TO BE DISREGARDED
IN CERTAIN CASES

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The First Deputy Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2 stand part.

1.28 pm

Robert Jenrick: Given the short nature of the Bill, I will not delay the Committee unduly, but I want to explain briefly the nature of the clauses.

Clause 1 amends the British Nationality Act 1981 to confirm that an individual exercising a free movement right in the UK in the relevant period was not subject to restrictions on the period for which they could remain. The aim of this clause is to provide legal certainty on the citizenship status of individuals born in the relevant period to a parent who was considered settled on the basis of living in the United Kingdom and exercising a free movement right here, or those who registered or naturalised based on that policy.

The clause does not create new British citizens where there would previously have been no reasonable expectation, on the basis of published policy and operational practice, of being British. It does not change anything for people who have always been considered British; rather, it simply confirms in law the position they have always been in. The clause does not necessitate that they make a separate application to become British and is not related to the UK's departure from the European Union. This issue has arisen separately and has been highlighted by the recent domestic legislation.

1.30 pm

For England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the remedial period is 1 January 1983 to 1 October 2000. That is the period between the British Nationality Act 1981 coming into force and the introduction by regulations of the requirement for European economic area nationals to have indefinite leave to be regarded as free from immigration time restrictions. During the remedial period, an EEA national was treated as settled in the UK if they were living here and exercising a free movement right. Clause 1 confirms that position.

The remedial periods specified in clause 1 are different in the Bailiwick of Jersey, the Bailiwick of Guernsey and the Isle of Man. Those jurisdictions fall within the territorial extent of the BNA and people born there are automatically British citizens. However, the Crown dependencies have their own legal systems and there are variations in the times at which they treated EU citizens

as free of immigration restrictions. Clause 1 reflects those differences to ensure that someone who had a reasonable expectation of being British under previous published policy or operational practice keeps the citizenship to which they thought they were entitled.

Clause 1(2) also specifies that the measures introduced by subsection (1) are to be treated as always having had effect. I understand that that approach is somewhat unusual, as it is usually right and proper that the consequences of past events can be understood in the context of the law as it stood at the time, not what it may become in the future, but the case for retrospection in this situation is clear.

Were the measures set out in clause 1 prospective only, it would mean that affected individuals would become British citizens only after the date when the measure came into force. That could have wide-ranging consequences for their ability to live, work and study in the UK, and may inadvertently leave individuals liable to repay benefits or healthcare costs to which they would not technically have been entitled at the time if they were not then, in law, a British citizen. It would also have knock-on effects for the children or family members of those affected individuals who became British citizens by virtue of their status.

It is clear, therefore, that in order to restore such individuals to the position that they and the Home Office have always considered them to be in, and to ensure that they suffer no adverse consequence through no fault of their own, the measures set out in clause 1 must be retrospective.

In conclusion, long-standing Government policy will now, by virtue of the Bill, be confirmed in law, thereby protecting the nationality status of people born in the UK to parents who were considered settled on the basis of exercising a free movement right, and those who registered or naturalised as British citizens based on that policy. That is clearly the right thing to do for the countless UK-born people who have long considered themselves to be British. For those reasons, I commend the clauses to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill, not amended, considered.

Third Reading

1.34 pm

Robert Jenrick: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

If only all Home Office Bills were as smooth as this one. It is a pleasure to speak on Third Reading and to use this opportunity to thank my officials at the Home Office for the good work they have done in producing this Bill in quick time, which provides the legal certainty that a significant number of people in this country—our fellow citizens—deserve. It is absolutely right that we put their citizenship status beyond doubt as quickly as possible, so that they are in no way disadvantaged and can continue their lives with the same rights and entitlements they have always enjoyed.

[Robert Jenrick]

I thank all those who have prioritised the passage of the Bill through the House, including the House authorities and the Bill team. I particularly thank representatives from the Project for the Registration of Children as British Citizens, the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association and the 3million, which have worked collaboratively and fruitfully with Government officials as the Bill has been developed.

I also thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for their support, which is appreciated, and Members on both sides of the House who came today to represent cases that had arisen in their constituencies. They can now report to their constituents, as we all can, that this important matter is being resolved. For the reasons I have set out, I urge all Members to support the Bill in its passage to the other place.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister.

1.36 pm

Stephen Kinnock: I echo everything that the Minister has just said and add our thanks to his officials and all the key organisations that have played a role in shaping the Bill. I also want to say to the Minister that this is very much a one-off—this sort of outbreak of violent agreement is a bug, not a feature. As I have said, we on the Labour Benches are very happy to support the rapid facilitation of the Bill through Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

1.37 pm

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Minister. This will perhaps be a lesson to him to bring forward Bills that he has consulted on and that are less contentious than those he usually brings to the House. I would also like to make him an offer: now that he has the whole afternoon free, I have 145 outstanding immigration cases that I would be happy to discuss with him.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Diocesan Stipends Funds (Amendment) Measure (HC 1413), a copy of which was laid before this House on 24 May, be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—*(Steve Double.)*

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Electronic Trade Documents Bill [*Lords*] may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—*(Steve Double.)*

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Ordered,

That James Cartlidge be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Gareth Davies be added.—*(Mr Marcus Jones, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

Errol Graham: DWP and Safeguarding Adults Board Inquiry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Steve Double.)*

1.38 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I start by thanking Mr Speaker and his office for granting me this very important Adjournment debate in relation to Errol Graham, and in particular the safeguarding review by Nottingham City safeguarding adults board that was published a couple of weeks ago.

It was June 2018 when bailiffs came to Errol Graham's flat to evict him and discovered that he was dead. Errol was penniless—he had no gas, no electricity and no water. His only food was two out-of-date cans of fish. At his 2019 inquest, the coroner confirmed that Errol had weighed four and a half stone when he died, and that the cause of death was starvation. He was 57 years old.

Errol suffered from severe mental ill health. He had been in receipt of employment and support allowance and housing benefit since 2014, until he missed a fitness for work assessment in 2017. He did not respond to the Department for Work and Pensions when it tried to contact him by phone and in person, and eight months later his ESA and housing benefit payments were halted, in accordance with DWP policy.

The coroner's report fell short of issuing a section 28 prevention of future deaths notice to the DWP over Errol's death, as the DWP witness at the time stated that a safeguarding policy review was underway by the Department. However, in July 2020 the coroner had to write to the DWP again, as it had failed to supply her with the new safeguarding policy. It is a bit moot whether there has actually been a revised safeguarding policy. Certainly, information from the House of Commons Library suggests that there have just been tweaks around the edges. There has been no new safeguarding policy, and as we will see as I proceed, the impacts have been felt elsewhere.

Just before recess, Nottingham City safeguarding adults board published an independent review of what it described as the “shocking and disturbing” events that led to Mr Graham's tragic and lonely death. In that report, the board concluded that multiple failings by the DWP, Mr Graham's GP practice and his social landlord meant that chances to save him were missed. Moreover, the Department for Work and Pensions also failed to share the severity of Mr Graham's illness with other agencies, including his landlord at Nottingham City Homes. Knowing Mr Graham's illness, the DWP failed to contact his GP for potential reasons as to why he was not engaging with the Department. Significantly, it has now emerged that the Department failed to disclose information from Errol's 2014 work capability assessment to that independent safeguarding review. A communiqué from Nottingham City Council on 17 May stated that the independent chair of Nottingham City safeguarding adults board, Lesley Hutchinson, had said:

“We can confirm that the 2014 documents were not provided” by the DWP
“for consideration by the review author.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. She has compassion and a heart for people who are in trouble, and we commend her for that. She often brings forward things that we all add our support to. Each day in our offices we witness people who have fallen foul of the DWP: those with extreme health difficulties, people who are desperate, people at their lowest—that is just the way they have had it. Does she feel that the DWP needs to be aware of those who need help, and that DWP staff need to be trained accordingly so that they can spot those who are in trouble? It is sometimes a knack, but I believe that is important.

Debbie Abrahams: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In fact, he was in the Chamber back in February 2020 when we had the previous debate and described some of these events. Three years on, nothing has changed. He is absolutely right: not only would it be nice, but it is a requirement. The DWP has a safeguarding requirement and a responsibility to ensure that the claimants who come to its attention are adequately protected.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing today's debate, which obviously highlights the sad death of my constituent Errol Graham. The purpose of a safeguarding adults review is not to hold an individual or organisation to account, but it is about agencies learning lessons to improve future practice. If tragedies such as Errol's death are to be prevented in future, which I am sure is what we all want, surely all agencies must share the relevant information with the board. Does she share my concern—I know she does—that in failing to share that 2014 assessment, the DWP did not assist the local authority in its really important duty in that respect?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is the purpose of this Adjournment debate. The situation has gone on for too long, with information not shared and information lost—I will come to that later on. There have been concerns about how the Department has acted to safeguard not just individual claimants but the information it has on claimants, so that it can learn those lessons and improve its practices.

This information from the 2014 work capability assessment—do not forget, Errol died in 2018—expressed in the clearest language that he would not be fit to work “indefinitely”. That was the language of the assessor. It was not him saying that he was not fit to work; it was the language on that 2014 work capability assessment, which was not presented either to the safeguarding review or to the High Court judge. It also was not presented at the coroner's inquest. The presenting of that report to the organisations that should have had it when making assessments of the circumstances of Errol's death has been carefully avoided. This is serious stuff. I know that the Minister is relatively new in the role, but I want to know why that 2014 work capability assessment was not provided specifically to the recent safeguarding review board. I will go back to the other instances in a moment.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about Errol. Errol was her constituent, and I have had long-standing contact with Mr Graham's daughter-in-law, Alison Burton.

She has said that the Department's behaviour raises “serious questions” about its honesty and transparency, given the Department's knowledge of Errol's significant mental distress and its failure to disclose it to the safeguarding review. That can be taken in conjunction with the Department's failure to provide peer review reports into the deaths of claimants to the independent reviewers of the work capability assessment, Professor Harrington and Dr Litchfield. Members will be aware that there was a statutory requirement to undertake independent reviews of the work capability assessment. There were two separate assessors; one was Professor Harrington, and the other was Professor Litchfield. None of the peer reviews—there have been a number of different names for what happens when the Department investigates the deaths of claimants—or serious case reviews and so on were provided to the independent reviewers.

The response I got when I asked various urgent questions on this issue a few years ago was, “Well, they did not ask for them.” Then—this is all on the record; I was going over it last night when I was writing this speech—in response to the urgent question that I secured on this issue, the answer was, “Well, they were lost. We no longer have these reports, so we cannot provide them.” It is clear to see why there is a crisis in confidence in the Department and why there is a lack of trust from not just families, but claimants themselves.

This issue needs to be seen in the context of the recent action by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which 14 months ago issued a section 23 notice to the Department over its concerns about the evidence that the Department is discriminating against disabled claimants. For 14 months, there has been nothing—nothing—from the Department, and there has been nothing from this Government. Surely as a Government they would see that the equality laws that have been set for everyone should also apply to them, but, no, 14 months on, there has been nothing. I will let people draw their own conclusion on what drives that, but if we say that the first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe, I think we would all agree that the DWP is clearly failing as far as disabled claimants are concerned.

In a 21st-century civilised society, the circumstances that led to Errol's death should shock us all, but Errol's death, unfortunately, is just one of many, and there is a pattern here. In addition to the lack of safeguarding provisions that led to Errol's death—even though, as I say, there was an awareness from 2014 of his severe condition—many social security claimants have been found fit to work and have then died. For example, a freedom of information application in 2019 showed that 274 claimants a month—a month—who had been found fit for work subsequently died within six months, which is a much higher mortality rate than for the population as a whole.

The true scale and causes of these deaths are simply unknown. In an answer to a written question I submitted last year, it was revealed that between 2019—so since the inquest into Errol's death—and June 2022, 140 more claimants and 39 serious harms were being investigated by the DWP, but that is only what the Department says it is investigating. The National Audit Office, in its review in 2020, said that it is probably a much, much higher figure.

[Debbie Abrahams]

Errol's story is an example of the Department's failure to safeguard claimants, and subsequently to avoid any form of scrutiny or accountability. Any Government who were confident in their policies would be open to scrutiny, but there is a pattern of avoidance by the Department, including the refusal to provide various reports and data to the Work and Pensions Committee, on which I sit. I have asked this in the past, but I am going to give the Minister and the Government one more opportunity: will the Government convene an independent inquiry into the scale and causes of the deaths of social security claimants? The Minister is welcome to intervene on me, but if he wants to include that in his response to the debate, that would be absolutely fine.

The seven Nolan principles of public life apply to us all—Ministers and MPs. Two of them are openness and transparency, but unfortunately, those principles are absent from the Minister's Department. In an area such as social security, this could not be more important. We need a paradigm shift in our social security system from one that demonises to one that is supportive and enabling. Disappointingly, I see a re-emergence of the vile shirker-scrounger narrative from 10 years ago, and a focus on working-age sick and disabled people and social security claimants.

I do not know whether there is anybody from *The Daily Telegraph* in the Gallery, but I have to point out that I saw its shameful editorial last week. Not only was it ignorant in some of the assertions made, but it has what I see as absolutely disgraceful rhetoric in trying to vilify social security claimants. Just like our NHS, our social security system should be there for any one of us in our time of need, providing dignity and security for all.

In 2020, I read from a list of people who we knew had died. At the time, I said:

"The death of any person as a result of Government policy is nothing less than a scandal... For too long, the Department has failed to address the effects of its policies. It must now act. Enough is enough."—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2020; Vol. 672, c. 155.]

Three years later, 140 more families are grieving. When will the Government sort this out?

1.54 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for all her work on this issue, and for the support that she has offered to Errol Graham's family. Errol's death was shocking and disturbing. We cannot change what happened, but we can and must learn the lessons. I am sure that all Members of the House have experience of supporting constituents who are facing work capability assessments, and know the anxiety that such reviews can induce.

I was not intending to speak today, but reading the safeguarding adults board review again prompted me to want to share this. At his inquest, a letter written by Errol was read out. His family believe that he had intended to take it along to the work capability assessment. We do not know that; the letter is undated and it was never sent, but I think it gives an insight into how he felt, and I hope the House will indulge me if I share it now—it is relatively short.

"Dear Sir/Madam,

I've had to put in writing how I feel as I find it hard to express myself. I wish I could feel and function normally like anyone else, but I find this very hard. I can't say I have a typical day because some are good, not many, clouded by very bad days. I get up as late as I can so that the day doesn't seem too long. On a good day I open my curtains, but mostly they stay shut. I find it hard to leave the house on bad days. I don't want to see anyone or talk to anyone. It's not nice living this way. I'm afraid to put my heating on and sit with a quilt around me to keep me warm. I dread any mail coming, frightened of what it might be because I don't have the means to pay, and this is very distressing. Most days I go to bed hungry, and I feel I'm not even surviving how I should be. Little things that people brush off are big things to me.

I have come on my own today because I have been unable to share how I feel with anyone because I don't think they would understand. It has made me ill to come here today. It is a big ordeal for me. My nerves are terrible and coping with this lifestyle wears me out. Sometimes I can't stand to even hear the washing machine and I wish I knew why. Being locked away in my flat I feel I don't have to face anyone. At the same time, it drives me insane. I think I feel more secure on my own with my own company, but wish it wasn't like that. I'm not a drinker and have never been so don't think that I'm here to abuse the system. Please judge me fairly. I am a good person but overshadowed by depression. All I want in life is to live normally. That would be the answer to my prayers. Thank you to all for taking the time to read this letter, I really appreciate it. I don't know how I'll cope when I see you all. I hope I will be OK."

I appreciate that the DWP did not know that that was how Errol felt, and neither did his social landlord or his GP. The coroner concluded that none of them were individually responsible for his death. However, the DWP was aware that Errol had a mental ill health condition.

In his response, will the Minister set out the steps that he is taking now to ensure that other claimants, both those currently supported by the DWP and those who might need support in the future, get the support that they need, and do not have their benefits cut off as a result of their poor mental health and inability to engage with the outside world and the agencies that should be there to support them? Errol's case is utterly heartbreaking. We cannot change what happened, but we must learn the lessons for others and prevent future deaths of that sort.

1.59 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Tom Pursglove): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this important debate. It is, of course, always tragic when a person dies having been in receipt of benefits, and my sincere condolences remain with Mr Graham's family. I assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that where there is an allegation that the DWP's actions may have in any way contributed to this outcome, we take it very seriously.

To begin with, I want to set in context the nature of the recommendations made by Nottingham City safeguarding adults board. Five recommendations were made, with three specific to Nottingham City Homes, one applying to all agencies—with an emphasis placed on Nottingham City Homes—and one specifically aimed at the DWP, working jointly with Nottingham City safeguarding adults board. I confirm to the House that the Department for Work and Pensions has accepted that recommendation, and my officials will work constructively and collaboratively with the safeguarding

board on that. We will approach taking that recommendation forward in good faith and with proper dialogue.

I also want to give some background on the case in question. Mr Graham was a claimant in receipt of employment and support allowance until his claim was closed in October 2017 following non-attendance at a work capability assessment. In the interim, he had not responded to calls, text messages or two home visits by the Department. Mr Graham had ceased to engage with his family, healthcare and other statutory agencies over a number of years, and was found deceased in his flat in or around June 2018. An inquest into Mr Graham's death was held in June 2019.

Since July 2020, my Department has co-operated fully and openly with Nottingham City safeguarding adults board on this very sad case. I am pleased to see that its report notes the "significant changes" that the DWP has made in its support of vulnerable claimants since 2019.

The board wrote to the Department in July 2021 confirming that it would be carrying out a safeguarding adults review into the death of Errol Graham. For the avoidance of doubt, it might be helpful to quote exactly how the board explained the scope of the review from its own terms of reference. It said:

"The scope period for the review is from June 2017—the date EG's benefit review process began—until 20.06.2018, the date EG unfortunately died. However, if agencies have information of relevance to the ToR before that date...it would be helpful if they briefly summarised that as well".

The Department complied with the board's request, providing it with detailed information in scope of the review as well as briefly summarising information from before 2017, as we were asked to do.

Debbie Abrahams: The Minister may be coming on to this—I hope he is. Will he ensure that he responds to my point about why the details of the 2014 work capability assessment were not made available to the review?

Tom Pursglove: If I may, I will make a little progress on this point. I am aware that a journalist has claimed that officials hid information from the board, but that is simply not true. They had no reason to do so. As explained, the board had the information that it requested. The board's published report includes a wording change stating that agencies were asked to "provide additional information" and not "briefly summarise" as in previous versions. That slight wording change could have led to the wrong impression that the DWP was asked to provide every single form and document relating to Mr Graham's benefit claim—even those outside the scope of the review. I believe that may have contributed to claims that information was hidden.

It is important to note that we know that the board extensively reviewed the findings of the 2021 judicial review proceedings in which a former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions successfully defended a claim in the High Court, challenging some of the decisions made in this case. That judgment referred to the content of a previous work capability assessment of Mr Graham's. The safeguarding board clearly understood from that, and the other information provided, what officials had discovered about Mr Graham's state of mind. It is difficult to see what the DWP would have gained by hiding it when the board had stated its review of the

findings. Officials continue to engage with the Nottingham City safeguarding adults board and we welcome having further conversations with it if needed.

It is important to understand the role of safeguarding adult boards in the context of Mr Graham's case. National guidance on safeguarding adults boards states:

"The purpose of a SAR is not to hold any individual or organisation to account, because there are other processes and regulatory bodies available for that purpose; they are about learning lessons for the future".

Those other processes include the coronial process, where coroners investigate unnatural deaths and where the cause of death is unknown. Nottingham City safeguarding adults board's role was to look at how agencies worked together to support Mr Graham and what lessons it could learn from his tragic death, not to re-examine the court's previous judgment or the coroner's conclusions. My Department's key obligation is to ensure that claimants receive the correct benefit entitlement at the right time. While we do not have a statutory duty of care or safeguarding duty, that does not mean that we do not care. We often need to consider a customer's particular circumstances to provide the right service or ensure appropriate support. We can help direct our claimants to the most appropriate body to meet their needs.

Debbie Abrahams: Why, then, did the witness speaking on behalf of the Department at the 2019 inquest make the point that a new safeguarding policy was being developed by the Department, if the Government do not have a safeguarding policy requirement?

Tom Pursglove: What I will do is set out the actions the Department is taking to ensure that our safeguarding obligations are upheld and that we support claimants in an appropriate way that is responsive to their needs and circumstances. The concrete actions the Department has taken to improve matters relating to this issue in recent years reflect previous learning.

I would also like to deal specifically with the point the hon. Lady made about holding a public inquiry. I am not in a position today to be able to commit to that. Clearly, attempted suicides and suicides are very complex issues. Where there is an allegation that the Department's actions may have contributed to that outcome, we take it very seriously. There already exists a wide, independent and transparent system for investigating such issues. Causes of death are determined by a doctor or coroner. Where a coroner identifies a risk of other deaths occurring in similar circumstances, they will issue a prevention of future deaths report to highlight that. The independent case examiner investigates serious complaints relating to the DWP. They report to the complainant and publish case studies of findings in the ICE annual report. The parliamentary and health service ombudsman also looks at serious cases and publishes reports on its website. For those reasons it is not our intention to set up an independent inquiry, but there are steps we have taken as a Department to improve matters in relation to safeguarding and I just want to set those out for the House, because they have already been implemented to support vulnerable customers. The initiatives were also highlighted, as I say, in Nottingham City safeguarding adults board report as changes the Department has implemented to improve services, and that point was acknowledged.

[Tom Pursglove]

First, we have introduced more than 30 advanced customer support senior leaders to support colleagues when dealing with customers who may be vulnerable or at-risk. Central to the role of those senior leaders is the work they take forward with external partners and organisations, creating relationships to support citizens and providing the critical link into external agencies' escalation routes and enabling cross-agency case collaboration. The Department also conducts internal process reviews, which form a core part of the Department's overall approach to learning and help inform improvement activities across all DWP product lines. Internal process reviews can make recommendations to help the Department to improve its processes, policies or quality of service. We commission them in response to a range of claimant circumstances or events, which include, but are not limited to, suicides, suicide attempts and self-harm. Not all internal process reviews conducted after a death relate to suicide. Therefore, those classified as relating to a death should not automatically be read as suicide cases. Furthermore, the fact that an internal process review is being carried out does not mean that the DWP has been found culpable in the circumstances or events leading to a claimant's death or a serious incident.

Similarly, the serious harm that prompts an internal process review investigation may relate to self-harm or a suicide attempt, or may also refer to other events that are considered to merit investigation. We have also broadened the range of circumstances where an internal process review is carried out, to increase our learning from cases where outcomes have been poor for claimants.

The Department has also set up the serious case panel, which meets quarterly to consider themes and issues that have arisen across DWP service lines, in order to agree changes and improvements. The panel has commissioned and implemented several changes since it was introduced. They include changes made to visiting vulnerable customers, where they have ceased to engage with the Department. Following two unsuccessful visits where concerns about the customer remain, the claim will no longer automatically be closed. Instead, the case will be escalated to an advanced customer support senior leader, who will liaise with relevant external agencies to assure the customer's safety.

The Department has also made changes to guidance on administering large payments to customers who may face challenges receiving or handling such payments. The panel has also prioritised the delivery of mental health awareness training to customer-facing colleagues. The training will build colleague capability and confidence in supporting customers with mental health conditions. Going forward, I am keen to engage with stakeholders, including from mental health charities and other organisations, to continue to make improvements to our services for our customers. I recently met Rethink, a mental health charity that was representing the families of some benefit claimants who have passed away. It is my intention to organise a future meeting with a representative member of the families, in partnership with Rethink.

I want to address a specific point that the hon. Lady has raised a number of times in this House about the Equality and Human Rights Commission in relation to the ongoing section 23 agreement discussions. We continue

to engage with that in good faith, but we must act in accordance with our legal obligations. The negotiations provided for under the Equality Act 2006 have been expressly confidential. Therefore, I cannot give a running update on the contents of the discussions. There are legal provisions under section 6 of the Equality Act that prevent disclosure of further details. Discussions are subject to general law principles. Parts of the discussions are also subject to legal privilege.

Debbie Abrahams: I have two brief points. First, if we have had all the updates on safeguarding, why have 140 more people died in the intervening period? The Minister seems to be saying, "Everything is fine, we've done this," but still, the Department is investigating 140 people, and we do not know the true figure. Secondly, there is nothing in the 2006 Act that says that the Department has to take 14 months to reach an agreement on how to improve the services and not discriminate against disabled people. There is nothing—I have gone through it.

Tom Pursglove: I do not accept the hon. Lady's initial point. I take these matters incredibly seriously. I am engaging thoroughly with stakeholders around these issues. She will recognise my approach to meeting Rethink and bereaved family members to discuss these issues and to work out what more we can do to improve these processes and in an open, transparent and constructive way. That is how I approach my responsibilities, and that will continue to be the case. These structures have been put in place, as the safeguarding board recognises, which are considerable improvements in recent times. Of course, we must always keep under review the appropriateness of these structures. We must make sure that learning from specific cases is captured. Processes and the way in which we go about our activities as a Department must be responsive to the issues raised through those formal structures.

On the section 23 discussions that are ongoing, the hon. Lady will recognise that this is a matter not just for the DWP. The discussions are going on between two parties, and both sides need to act in good faith in reaching conclusions. It is right that we do that in response to the commission from the EHRC, and in a way that is compatible with the requirements under the Equality Act. That is what we will continue to do. As I have said before, when I have a substantive update that I am able to provide to the House, I will do that. I have made that undertaking, which I reiterate today. It would be inappropriate for the Department to discuss the contents of what may or may not be included within an agreement, or the contents of any information that may be published in future, while confidential discussions are ongoing.

My Department strives to be a learning organisation, continually seeking to better understand the experiences of our customers and any challenges that they may face in their interactions with us. We are committed to using that learning to develop our systems and processes and to make improvements to the experience of our customers. In fact, that underpins all the work we are doing through our White Paper reforms, to ensure that people have a better experience of the journey within the benefits system and that we provide benefits that are more flexible.

Lilian Greenwood: I have listened with interest to what the Minister has said. As a result of the changes that the Department has made, is he confident that no one else will face the same position Errol faced because he disengaged? Nobody denies that he was not engaging with his GP, housing provider or the DWP, but the tragic fact is that he starved to death as a result of that failure to engage. The Minister described the new layer that is now in place if there are two failed safeguarding visits, but is he confident that someone whose mental ill health prevents them from engaging, as is set out so clearly and poignantly in the letter, would not face the same position of having their benefits withdrawn and, as a result, having nothing to eat, in a freezing cold home, with no utilities connected?

Tom Pursglove: It is impossible not to be incredibly moved and concerned by what happened to Errol Graham. Both Ministers and officials in the Department are absolutely determined that the learning that comes out of this case, which is reflected in the recommendation that has been made by the safeguarding adults board, must be acted upon. We must continue to consistently ensure that where issues that require improvement are highlighted, we take steps in reality, in terms of our processes, to make sure that that follows on.

It is significant that there are now checks that ensure people's cases are not suspended or terminated when we have not heard back from them, and that we have senior customer service leaders who work on a cross-agency basis to ensure that people are properly supported. They were the right steps to take and they have been informed by cases like this. It is right that we continue to constantly monitor and understand our claimants' circumstances and needs, and that we improve the journey through the benefits system more generally, wherever there is an opportunity to do that.

That is why I am passionate about the reforms that were announced through the White Paper, including matching expert assessors with particular conditions, monitoring fluctuating conditions more effectively and

ensuring that people have the smoothest possible journey in their experience and interaction with the DWP. The hon. Lady has my commitment that we will continue to learn. We will undertake to make sure that all our processes are fit for purpose and kept under review, and to make changes when they are required.

That is the constructive spirit in which I am approaching our conversations with Rethink, for example, which has an insight into mental health conditions, so that we can understand what more we can do to ensure our processes are responsive to those with mental health conditions. I know Rethink participated in some engagement with my officials only yesterday.

Debbie Abrahams: My final point is that Rethink is calling for an independent public inquiry into the death. Will the Minister be supporting that campaign by Rethink?

Tom Pursglove: The position relating to a public inquiry is the position that I set out earlier, but within our existing processes and the transparency applying to them, I am keen to hear from Rethink and other charities what more they think we can do, or which parts of those processes they think could be improved. I approach those conversations very much in that spirit.

Ultimately, our measures will ensure that we provide benefits for, in particular, our most vulnerable customers in a more flexible and compassionate manner, and that their interactions with us constitute a positive experience. We will continue to drive forward change within the Department on the basis of what we have learnt. I appreciate the opportunity I have had this afternoon to describe some of the work that the Department is doing, "on the ground floor", to ensure that our systems are as responsive as possible, and that all learning is captured and acted upon.

Question put and agreed to.

2.20 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 June 2023

[MRS PAULINE LATHAM *in the Chair*]

Afghan Women and Girls

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the International Development Committee on 31 January and 21 February 2023, on Situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, HC 1087, and written evidence to the International Development Committee, on Situation for women and girls in Afghanistan, reported to the House on 21 March 2023, HC 1087.]

9.30 am

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered support for Afghan women and girls.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mrs Latham.

“We are deeply concerned about the apparent perpetration in Afghanistan of gender persecution—a systematic and grave human rights violation and a crime against humanity.”

Those are the words of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Richard Bennett, and the chair of the UN working group on discrimination against women and girls at the end of a visit to Afghanistan last month. Because of the gravity and extent of the issues that we are debating today, I hope Members will allow me to spend a short time outlining the events of the last 22 months in Afghanistan.

In August 2021, Kabul fell to the Taliban; within two weeks the UK had withdrawn from the country, ending a 20-year presence. There was a promise that women would not suffer under the Taliban’s regime. That was viewed with suspicion, which has proven to be correct. In March 2022, girls in Afghanistan were barred from attending secondary school—they have not returned. Shortly thereafter women were barred from travelling more than 48 miles without a male guardian, and that requirement in May 2022 was extended to any time a woman leaves her home. Despite that rule, men and women could not mix and were banned from dining out together or attending public spaces such as parks at the same time. That *de facto* ban is now formalised in all public recreation spaces.

In December last year there were a series of assaults on the ability of Afghan women to work. They may not attend university, teach or work with non-governmental organisations. They may not undertake any public office. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs has been disbanded and replaced by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Women are required to wear a full body veil. Women and the men who are suspected of opposing the Taliban are harassed, kept in arbitrary detention, tortured and killed. I am sure that we have all received correspondence in our role as MPs that confirms those facts. Such a crime against humanity is so big and so appalling that it is tempting to look away. Those of us here today know that we cannot and that the Government must not.

On a basic level, millions of people are in dire need in Afghanistan. According to the World Food Programme, nearly 25 million Afghans are living in poverty, and the UN estimates that two thirds of the Afghan population will need humanitarian assistance this year. To put it another way, in evidence to the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, which I co-chair, a representative from Save the Children told us that only 3% of families can currently meet all their basic needs, including food and shelter.

It is true that Afghanistan was facing difficulties prior to the fall of Kabul and the return of the Taliban. Economic conditions were deteriorating and droughts were increasing poverty and food insecurity. There are serious questions over the approach taken in relation to UK aid, but I know that the International Development Committee is doing excellent work examining that, so I will not consider it in detail today. What is irrefutable is that the economy and the provision of the most basic services have declined significantly in the past two years.

Expelling half of working-age adults from the workplace inevitably damages an economy, with businesses closed because of lack of staff, lack of customers, or both. It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle, and an expensive one. The World Economic Forum has found that the bans on women working will cause a loss of \$600 million to GDP in the short term, while restrictions could lead to a further \$1.5 billion loss of output by the end of next year. Meanwhile, a lack of aid, limited by many countries in the wake of the Taliban’s violent seizure of power and the exclusion of women from public life restricts access to public services, including, critically, healthcare. That is simply a perfect storm for many women. Following decades of fighting, many households are headed by women, who make up the majority of NGO workers. Those families are hit hardest by the Taliban’s edicts. The evidence from networks of Afghan women heard by the APPG is that women and children are commonly seen in groups begging. They face extreme poverty. Children are being sold, and child marriage is rising. This is in no way abstract.

When the APPG has heard from organisations that have been able to resume some kind of service, usually in nutrition or health, that resumption has taken place only region by region when exemptions from the edict banning women from working with NGOs have been agreed. The exemptions are obviously not secure, and are at constant risk of being revoked by the Taliban.

I accept that none of that is straightforward, particularly when the outcome is a decision not to provide fundamental assistance, but evidence from NGOs on the ground is clear: the women who need the most assistance are less likely to be reached by all-male teams. In any case, accepting the restriction would set a precedent and suggest that the Taliban’s rules were being accepted.

I am sure the Minister is concerned about the operation of NGOs on the ground in Afghanistan and about the need to try to prevent the humanitarian disaster we see unfolding. I hope he will use his time in the Chamber today to update Members on conversations the Government are having with NGOs and the approach the Government will take to the provision of aid to regional actors.

Will the Minister update Members on the breadth of NGOs with which the Government are engaging? This is a constant theme for the APPG and one to which I shall return, but it appears that only limited interests

[Wendy Chamberlain]

are being listened to by the Government. We need to ensure that we hear a wider range of voices, and that those voices are amplified and listened to. For example, a lesser-known organisation that has given evidence to the APPG is the Aseel phone app, which provides a digital platform that gives humanitarian aid directly through connected citizens, rather than incurring the bureaucracy and overheads of larger organisations. How can we here support such innovation by those who are in the country?

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The point the hon. Lady has made about the potential of technologies as ways to send money directly to citizens who are suffering under the tyranny of organisations such as the Taliban is significant for the UK Government. Obviously, we need to ensure that the security is tight, but technology offers a non-traditional way to get support directly to people who would otherwise suffer.

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the right hon. Member, who is my APPG co-chair, for that intervention, and yes, I agree entirely. The Aseel app is innovative in that it allows people out of or within the country to send money to buy food and other essential goods and services that are provided by people in-country. That money is not just aid or a handout; it is providing work in the Afghan economy.

On the subject of NGOs and aid spending, I urge the Minister to use this opportunity to pledge a reversal of the spending cuts in Afghanistan. This is simply the worst time to withdraw funds. Not only is every pound desperately needed, but for each pound spent two more are now required to achieve the same impact, owing to the expense involved in operating safely in Afghanistan.

If the Minister is unable to make such a pledge today, I hope that he will return to his colleagues with the message not only that more funding, not less, is needed, but that spending must at least return to three-year cycles to allow for forward planning. Reducing funding allocations to a limited annual basis might have been understandable as a temporary measure at the height of the pandemic, but those days have passed. Meanwhile, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact is clear that there will be both operational and reputational impacts for the UK aid programme if the one-year cycle is maintained.

A specific way in which Afghan women and girls need support is through education. Secondary school girls have been kept at home and away from learning for more than a year, with no hope of a return in sight. Those girls might have reached their adolescence, but they are children, and their future is being stolen from them. Research by Save the Children has found that 25% of care givers believe that the teenage girls in their care are chronically depressed. No matter what political situation unfolds in Afghanistan in five, 10 or 15 years, there are millions of girls who arguably will always struggle to support and advocate for themselves, and to know their worth, as a result of the trauma and the restrictions under which they currently exist.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate. On her point about depression and mental health, she might

have seen a powerful report on the BBC last night from Yogita Limaye, who reported on the epidemic of mental health and suicide among women and girls. Indeed, the son of one woman stuck in Afghanistan—the son happens to be my constituent—said to me that his mother said to him, “Please pray for me to die in peace before the Taliban do anything to me.” That is amplified everywhere. Does my hon. Friend agree that one important step the UK Government could take, particularly for women and girls, is to provide some sort of bespoke, safe and legal route for them to come to this country?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the report last night. I recently attended Glasgow Afghan United in the constituency of the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and I spoke to a woman there who is currently pregnant, but her toddler is back in Afghanistan. I do not know how someone deals with that, to be honest, from a mental health perspective, so yes. I know that the Minister responding today is not from the Home Office, but given that the Government have made some commitments under their Illegal Migration Bill to look at safe and legal routes, I am certainly sure that all of us speaking here believe that safe and legal routes for Afghan women and girls are a priority, and certainly should be.

A return to formal education is the long-term goal. If the Government can provide any update on their strategy in that regard, it would be most welcome. In the meantime, as the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts)—hopefully that was okay—said, we know that the internet is a fantastic resource for education and technology, for reading, learning languages, maths and science.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for raising this really important topic. I apologise, as I cannot stay long. On the subject of education, a point made to me by a number of Afghan women when I was at the UN Commission on the Status of Women conference is that it is utterly shocking that girls are banned from leaving their homes and going to school in Afghanistan, but, in the meantime, senior members of the Taliban take their own daughters and send them out of the country to schools in other countries. Does she agree that one of the things the international community could do is try to tighten up the sanctions against those family members to prevent that?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the right hon. Member for that powerful intervention. Yes—is it not always interesting how repressive regimes, particularly when they are repressive in relation to women and girls, take a different approach when it comes to their own children and families? We need to call out that hypocrisy, and I am grateful to her for doing so.

I will turn again to the technology aspect of education. The APPG learned in evidence from women in Afghanistan that electricity and internet blackouts are making access to education more and more difficult. The suggested solution is the distribution of wi-fi dongles that connect to third-country satellites but, as someone recently pointed out to me, the UK, USA and NATO cannot have spent the best part of two decades carrying out an operation in a country without putting infrastructure for communications in place. I am keen to explore how we can utilise what is already there. We need to find a way

to spread that access to those who need it. An alternative is the design and funding of education spread through radio or offline applications. Again, I hope that the Government are engaging with all such initiatives. While women and girls are prevented from accessing education, we need to do everything we can to help them to do so in a safe way.

For older girls and, indeed, for women, access to international universities is vital to continue their education and ensure that they are best placed to help in the eventual rebuilding of their home country. There are Members—I see some here—who attended the recent showing of the Alex Crawford Sky News documentary, which highlighted the fact that Afghanistan is a society; women provide healthcare to women, and men to men. If women are prevented from attending university in order to train to become doctors, we can absolutely see what the outcomes will be for women from a healthcare perspective.

Some universities in the UK are already offering scholarships to Afghan women, and I would be grateful for an update from the Minister on any support that the Government might be able to provide to universities in that regard. I know that visas, even for education, have been incredibly problematic. Indeed, I wrote to the Home Office about that recently, asking for the ban on accompanying family members to be waived, given the status of many Afghan women as sole caregivers for their children and the restrictions I outlined earlier. I appreciate those problems are not technically part of the Minister's portfolio, but we need to strive to make the current system workable. It clearly is not, with so few successful applicants. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) highlighted, we also need to expand visa routes for all vulnerable women who need to escape to safety.

Munira Wilson: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. On visas and the criteria, given the challenges that women face in accessing education, patently the requirement to learn English needs to be waived, as does that of travelling to Pakistan to get biometrics. My hon. Friend is well aware of a case I have raised on the Floor of the House four times of five British children who are stuck in Kabul and whom I have been trying to get out for 18 months. They have British passports and four of them are girls, so they cannot go to school. The Minister for Immigration is willing to look at the case. Their Afghan mother cannot get a visa to come here and the latest is that she has been told she has to go to Pakistan to get biometric tests. She cannot travel to Pakistan without a chaperone, so I am being asked how she can get to the UK without a chaperone. That is the latest hurdle. I implore the Minister to take this message back to the Home Office: we need a sensible approach to visas for women and girls.

Wendy Chamberlain: I have heard my hon. Friend's impassioned plea for that family. What does it say that we cannot support British children to leave Afghanistan and what does that mean for those in the country more widely? It is clear that we need to take a sensible approach. We cannot use the Taliban's restrictions as an excuse for not doing what we should for our citizens and those who are vulnerable.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for securing this important debate. I have a similar issue. My constituent, who was a former office manager for the British Council in Afghanistan, is eligible for the resettlement scheme, alongside three other members of his family. However, his 22-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter are not because they are over 18. Considering the Taliban's restrictions on women and the danger a young lone woman in Afghanistan would be in, does the hon. Member agree that the Foreign Office must ensure that young women are not abandoned to fend for themselves in a country where they have no rights or freedoms?

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank the hon. Member for bringing that case to light. There is no doubt: right from the outset of the fall of Kabul, our failure properly to support our British Council colleagues working in country was quite shameful. We need to do more. They are people who should come under existing routes. We talk about needing new routes, but the existing ones are woefully inadequate and are not doing what they were designed to do—indeed, what we were all assured they would do when we were told about them on the Floor of the House.

In relation to visas, I want to focus the Minister's attention on one issue and I hope he can update us on this today: the ability of women, as referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham, to reach third-party countries—I am concerned that could be used as an excuse not to do what we should be doing—and their support and safety in those countries before visas are approved. I had an email from a former female judge who is now stuck in Pakistan. Women have very specific limited mobility. They cannot just leave their homes and head to the border. Pakistan is not necessarily a safe country for vulnerable women to be spending time without family and resources. We have to acknowledge that. I am no expert on what the solution might be, but there are many at the Government's disposal in the region and in security. The UK must be a safe haven for Afghan women and any visa route must be designed with those women and their specific needs in mind.

I have touched on the very real issues where the UK Government can and should provide support: aid, education, healthcare, infrastructure and safe passage. As I conclude, I want to turn to the Government's strategic priorities in Afghanistan. This year has seen the publication of the UK women, peace and security national action plan and the international women and girls strategy. It is not clear how they apply to the Government's actions in Afghanistan. The Minister will know that strategic objectives for his Department under the action plan are to increase women's participation, leadership and representation in decision making; to prevent gender-based violence; to support the needs of women and girls in crises, and ensure that they can participate and lead in responses; to increase the accountability of security and justice actors to women and girls; and to ensure they respond to the need of women and girls as part of their approach to transnational threats.

Liz Saville Roberts: The hon. Lady is being generous with her time. One thing completely within the Government's power is the steps they take with the integration of Afghan refugees to the United Kingdom.

[Liz Saville Roberts]

My office has been working with a young woman called Mah through Urdd Gobaith Cymru, which is much engaged with the integration of Afghan refugees at its centre in Cardiff, which has been recognised as an exemplar.

Surely we should look to prepare women and girls for the possibility of going back to Afghanistan, and ensure that they have every opportunity through education and skills gaining. We should also recognise the way that dynamics work in Afghan families in the UK. I hope to work with Mah to set up a toolkit to support women and girls as they arrive in the UK from Afghanistan, but I sincerely believe that this is something the Government should be leading on, showing what they can do within their powers in the United Kingdom.

Wendy Chamberlain: We have to remember these people come to the UK fleeing conflict in Afghanistan. Many of them, if the situation changes in Afghanistan, want to go back to help and support. I think about the judges that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) works to support, and about those who are former MPs or have worked for NGOs. These are women who care passionately about their country and want to return to make it better, when and if they can, and we should look to do anything we can do to help them maintain that while they are here in the UK.

The women and girls strategy sets out the principles by which the Minister's Department will be governed: standing up and speaking out for women's and girls' rights and freedoms; emboldening and amplifying the work of diverse grassroots women's organisations and movements; targeting investment towards the key life stages for women and girls; acting for and with women and girls impacted by crises and shocks; and strengthening the political, economic and social systems that protect and empower women.

Those are all excellent ideals and I am sure that everyone here, regardless of party, can get behind them, but I want to ask the Minister what they actually mean for women and girls in Afghanistan. What can I tell the networks of Afghan women who give evidence to our APPG about what the Government's concrete plans are? I will be quite honest, Minister: they are not feeling very positive about the UK and its role in relation to Afghanistan. How are the Government standing up and speaking for their rights and freedoms? How are the Government working with the whole spectrum of women's organisations? How are the Government supporting Afghan women's leadership? How are the Government investing in women and girls? How are the Government preventing gender-based violence, which is institutionalised across Afghanistan?

I will give the Minister a simple starting point, as I conclude. Will he today join the UN in naming the atrocities in Afghanistan for what they are—a gender apartheid? Every point here is vital; everything needs addressing by the Government. Frankly, it should not need me and this debate for the Government to hear the voices of Afghan women. The APPG has heard from women with a wide variety of perspectives and experience, yet the Government have so far declined actively to engage. Let me state that more clearly. These women are

here—the secretariat of the APPG is here today—and they are experts who want to share their expertise, but the Government seem to block them from the rooms where the decisions about them are being made. Engaging with a small number of stakeholders is not good enough, and it is not representative.

It is not often that politicians want to make themselves obsolete, but in this case I really do. I urge the Government to make my role as an intermediary obsolete, and to engage directly with all the Afghan women and regional experts who are at their disposal. They may be silenced in their home country; that cannot persist here.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. We have limited time; I intend to begin calling the Front-Bench spokesmen at approximately 10.28 am, so we have just over half an hour. When Members are called, would they temper their speeches to a short time?

9.54 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) and the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate.

Women and girls in Afghanistan are being forcibly disappeared from public life by the Taliban. That much is absolutely clear. It is deliberate and it is tragic. I want to reflect briefly on the commitments that the UK Government made to women and girls in Afghanistan. They built women and girls up, they gave them access to education, and then they brutally took that away when Afghanistan fell and have left them in that situation.

I remember very clearly the phone calls that I got from many constituents who had family in Afghanistan in August 2021. My office was inundated by calls from desperate families who were terrified for their relatives. I am fairly sure that most of them are still stuck in Afghanistan, or perhaps in Pakistan or somewhere else; they have not got to the UK. There were, I believe, over 80 cases, but I am aware of only a couple who managed to get family to safety in the UK.

A lot of that has to do with the petty and small bureaucracy of the Home Office, because disproportionately it was husbands who were here and had wives or families in Afghanistan that they could not get over because of earnings thresholds. They had made applications or they were waiting to earn enough to bring their family over, but they could not bring them over, because that paperwork was not in place.

The very nature of the immigration system makes people unsafe. Many of my constituents who were in touch had applications that were in process but could not be completed after the UK pulled out, because the families could not get to Islamabad to complete the paperwork. I had a constituent who waited a further six months, with the Taliban knocking on his wife's door, for UK Visas and Immigration to get round to processing her appeal and issuing documents, despite chasing by my office. I had a constituent whose elderly mother was on her own in Kabul and being asked to complete a tuberculosis test to come over.

Others had English language tests as a barrier. I had a case of a husband and father whose children and wife in Afghanistan were refused access to the Baron hotel because he could not be there to vouch for them. As far as I know, they are there. There are now many families stuck in Pakistan. *The Independent* reported in April that about 1,000 families, including 500 children, are stuck in limbo in Pakistan. They could be here with their families, but because of that petty bureaucracy, they are not.

I ask the Minister for further clarification on what has happened to expressions of interest in the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, because I know of one made back in August 2022. In the letter that I got from Lord Murray in April, the Home Office said that it was unable to provide a timescale but would notify the constituent of the outcome as soon as possible. I am not aware of any progress on that. How many people's cases are still pending in that scheme, and when will they be able to get to safety in the UK and come to their family? Ideally, we would want the Taliban gone. Ideally, we would want women to have a safe and prosperous life with their children in Afghanistan, and a future. That future has been stolen from them. In the meantime, we need safe and legal routes so that they can come to safety here.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. I wish to apologise. I seem to have caused consternation. We were told that Patrick Grady was the SNP spokesman—it was checked by the Clerks, and that is what they were told—so we will swap round and Patrick Grady will wind up for the SNP.

9.58 am

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. May I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) not just for securing today's debate, but for her excellent speech? Few of us could forget the heart-wrenching scenes almost two years ago. I was a newly elected MP at the time, and my office, like most others, was inundated with pleas from desperate constituents seeking to get loved ones and former colleagues out. What was particularly striking was how many made specific mention of their fears for female relatives. They were terrified of what the return of the Taliban would mean for women and girls.

History, as we know, does not move in a straight line. Over the past two years, women and girls in Afghanistan have seen their rights rolled back and hard-won freedoms lost. We also know that women and girls in Afghanistan are fighting back. With acts ranging from peaceful protest to posting on social media, Afghan women have resisted. It is important that we take this opportunity to acknowledge their extraordinary courage and bravery in risking not only their physical safety but, in many cases, their lives. It is also important to show that we have not forgotten their plight and to shine a spotlight on their current circumstances.

Shortly after the last British soldiers departed Afghanistan, the Prime Minister at the time pledged to set up a bespoke resettlement scheme focused on the most vulnerable, particularly women and children. Despite

the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme having three referral pathways, there is no specific route to apply to, making it virtually impossible for most Afghan women and children to get on to the scheme. I hope the Minister will address that today. How do women and girls access the referral pathways? Surely, establishing safe and legal routes is the answer.

10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I welcome you to your new position, Mrs Latham. Usually you are contributing to Westminster Hall debates, but today you are making sure that we are contributing in the right way. I wish you well in your new role.

I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing the debate. I am happy to add my comments in support of what she said. She does much in this Parliament to protect and promote the needs of Afghan women and girls. I declare an interest as chair of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief.

I am sure that every Member shares the horror we have all felt since the fall of Kabul nearly two years ago. In that time, the rights of women in Afghanistan have been drastically reduced. As hon. Members have mentioned, women have been barred from governmental jobs, there have been travel restrictions and bans on education, a strict dress code has been introduced, and women have been prevented from working for NGOs. How discriminatory that is! It means that women cannot even earn money or use their skills to contribute to society. It is really quite annoying.

The repressive and barbaric policies have resulted in 80% of schoolgirls being out of education, a 25% reduction in the number of women working and a loss of \$1 billion to Afghanistan's GDP. However, I will focus on the double vulnerability of women and girls from religious minority groups in Afghanistan, and address some of the UK policies that—I say this with great respect—are failing to protect women from such communities.

The last two years have seen many of Afghanistan's religious minorities decimated, with large exoduses from Christian, Hindu and Sikh communities. The remnants of those communities have been forced to live in hiding across Afghanistan, either remaining completely hidden or hiding any religious practices or symbols that are core to their faith. The introduction of an extreme interpretation of sharia law has had a significant effect on women from many religious minorities. The compulsory use of the burqa robs those women of their identity, leaving many of them choosing to remain indoors rather than adopt the new dress code. A change in law has also nullified Christian marriages, opening up women to allegations of adultery, which now carries a punishment of death by stoning. Their marriages are not recognised, so they have a double vulnerability.

Out of all Afghanistan's religious minorities, the Hazara community has been at the forefront of attacks and restrictions on women and girls. Not only has the group been affected by Taliban oppression, but it has been targeted by Islamic State's Khorasan province, with no protection whatsoever from the security forces. Many of us will be aware of the suicide bombing of the Kaaj educational centre in Kabul on 30 September, which killed 54 girls as they sat exams. That is only one of nearly a dozen attacks on Hazara schools in the last

[Jim Shannon]

two years. Since the Taliban gained control, there has been an increase in sexual violence targeted at women across Afghanistan. For those from a Hazara background, that has been particularly acute.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend raises an important point about freedom of expression in Afghanistan. Does he agree that when politicians in western countries express empathy or demand support for communities that suffer under oppressive regimes, they are often accused of wanting to westernise nations? It is important to say that we are expressing support for the Afghan people to decide their future, and for women and girls within their community to decide the best way forward for them.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend always makes wise interventions. He is right: we are not trying to westernise Afghanistan. It is about people being able to choose their religious belief. I would protect anyone in this world who has a different religious belief.

The Hazara inquiry found evidence that sexual violence and forced marriage had been used as a tool to deny those communities a future by targeting women. The honour system is prevalent and victims' lives are at risk. Ninety-seven per cent of Afghans live in poverty, two thirds of the population need humanitarian assistance, and 20 million people face acute hunger. At a meeting of the UN Security Council in December, concerns were expressed that groups were being excluded from humanitarian aid because they were Christians, Sikhs or different religions. Aid must reach all Afghans, including women, minorities and other vulnerable groups. Against that backdrop, the UN reported in March that it was forced to cut food rations in Afghanistan due to a shortage of funding from the international community.

I conclude with three questions for the Minister. First, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office budget for Afghanistan is due to be cut by 53%. What assessment has the FCDO made of the impact of those cuts, specifically on women and religious minorities receiving aid on the ground? In particular, I would like to hear about the impact on Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and other small groups.

My second question concerns the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. Other hon. Members have referred to the scheme, and I have a case that I wish to take up with the Minister, if he has time. They ACRS has three pathways. The third is for those who have been identified as belonging to a particularly vulnerable group, including women and members of religious minority groups. The scheme launched with the aim of resettling 20,000 people in five years. An expression of interest could only be made seven months after the scheme formally opened. In the short time that the scheme was open, some 11,400 expressions of interest were submitted under pathway 3. The vast majority of those who expressed an interest are still awaiting news or updates, even as their lives are in danger.

Up to now, the pathway has been open only to British Council and GardaWorld contractors, and Chevening alumni. I have the utmost respect for the Minister and he knows that, but I and many other Members are frustrated by the lack of clarity and urgency on this

scheme. I say that with great respect and honesty. There is not one of us here who does not have a case that we need sorting out, not because we think we are better than anyone else but because those people are on the frontline.

When I was in Pakistan in February-time, I met a man with a wife and four children who had fled Afghanistan and was living in Islamabad. He is in the scheme. I gave the documents to the Immigration Minister. He worked for the British Army—if ever there was a case!—but we cannot get him out. Why is that happening? Will the Minister tell me how many have been resettled under pathway 3, and let us know when the scheme will start providing protection for the women and religious minorities it was created for? That is our purpose for being here. Let us get answers.

10.7 am

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I welcome you to your place, Mrs Latham, and congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this important debate.

Women are particularly at risk in Afghanistan, as a consequence of their sex and the overwhelmingly misogynistic and brutal society that the Taliban are imposing on the people of Afghanistan. Hon. Members may be aware that I have been working with the former judge Marzia Babakarkhail, who came to the United Kingdom in 2008 after two attempts on her life by the Taliban. Marzia has organised the campaign for the United Kingdom to assist female judges and prosecutors in danger from the Taliban. She has daily contact with these women and has the weight of the world on her shoulders. Day in, day out, she gets messages and calls from women who fear that they will be murdered by the Taliban. At least one already has been. Marzia has taken on a huge burden and the emotion laid on to her daily would be too much to bear for most of us. She has been a tower of strength, but she, too, is deeply affected. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to her.

The United Kingdom encouraged women in Afghanistan to take up the roles of judges and prosecutors as part of our project to support the creation of a democracy governed by the rule of law. We encouraged these women to be part of a nation-building project that has now put them in the most severe danger. I am ashamed that the United Kingdom has abandoned them.

Early on, with the assistance of philanthropists, including JK Rowling, Baroness Helena Kennedy managed to get some of those women out. They are starting new lives in the west, but dozens have been left behind. Reuters journalists Emma Batha and Orooj Hakimi recently chronicled their plight in detail in an article published on 3 May. If the United Kingdom were prepared to offer more humanitarian visas, we could offer hope to those women. I have been campaigning for that for a long time, and have raised the issue repeatedly in Parliament. Last summer, I met Foreign Office officials, who felt that a case could be made for those women, but I fear that the Home Office is standing in the way of progress.

Last month, I presented a petition requesting that the House of Commons urge the Government to immediately help evacuate and settle female judges, prosecutors and their families from Afghanistan by providing emergency visas. It mirrored an online petition signed by more

than 56,000 people. It was signed by the dean of the Faculty of Advocates—effectively the chair of the Scottish Bar—my friend Roddy Dunlop KC, reflecting the solidarity of people in the legal profession across the United Kingdom in respect of the plight of our colleagues in Afghanistan. The petition asked for urgent action, and the following day I met the Prime Minister to urge him to take action to save those women. He seemed favourably disposed to my arguments for a special humanitarian visa, and so did the Minister for Immigration when I raised the matter in the Chamber two weeks ago, but we now need a sense of urgency.

At least one of those women has already been murdered. Although some have managed to escape and slowly rebuild their lives abroad, many are still trapped in Afghanistan, and the criminals and terrorists they prosecuted and sentenced have been freed from prison and are actively hunting them down. Taliban fighters have raided their former homes looking for them, and many are in hiding, living in constant fear. Those women, whom the west encouraged to enter professions such as the law and lead a new civic Afghanistan, are at risk due to their former position in civic life and doubly so because of their sex. As the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) said, they cannot travel unaccompanied, which makes it more difficult for them to hide and flee.

The UK should have acted long ago to help those women, and it is a disgrace that we have not. What we have done so far is not nearly enough; urgent action is needed. I realise that the Minister is not a Home Office Minister, but nevertheless my question for him is this: when will the United Kingdom Government introduce a humanitarian visa scheme for the women of whom I speak? Please will he ask his Home Office colleagues to put a timescale on it? I understand that there are logistical difficulties in getting those women out of the country, but Germany has a scheme that I urge the British Government to look at. Something must be done without further delay; otherwise, the blood of those women and their children will be on our hands.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): Order. Although some of the Members not on the list who wish to speak were late, I will call them if they are very brief.

10.13 am

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): That is extremely kind of you, Mrs Latham.

I wish to make a single point, which I urge the Minister to take away. After the invasion of Ukraine, the Home Office set up a special unit on the parliamentary estate in Portcullis House staffed by knowledgeable and sympathetic Home Office civil servants, and it was possible for MPs to engage directly with them in support of particular cases of outstanding humanitarian worth. Why should we not reinstate that hub, which would make it easy for those of us who know of cases exactly like those just described by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) to feed them into the system, and would mean that there is no chance of them being delayed or ignored, and that there could be no prevarication? When we engage with the relevant officials directly, as we did over Ukraine, we get results. Why should we not help those people in

Afghanistan, to whom we have a particular obligation, given that we were prepared to do that for those from Ukraine, towards whom we had fewer obligations but understandable sympathy?

10.14 am

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate you on your new position, Mrs Latham, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I apologise for being late; I had not intended to speak, but I think my intervention would have tried your patience by being a little lengthy. I will also be very brief.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), who does a fantastic job as chair of the APPG for Afghan women and girls. It is a pleasure to be a member of that group. To follow on from the contribution of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), Marzia Babakarkhail is one of my caseworkers. As was explained, she fled Afghanistan as a former judge after the Taliban tried to assassinate her twice. She knows and has experience of what the Taliban are capable of, and how they do target women and girls, particularly in positions of authority. She knows the consequences of that.

As the hon. and learned Member explained, Marzia Babakarkhail is in daily contact with people who fear for her lives. The seriousness of the situation cannot be underestimated. It is not some dystopian novel, like Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale"; it is real life for women and girls in Afghanistan now. As we sit here, this is what they are going through day in, day out.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) secured an excellent debate in January, where we looked at the different Afghan resettlement schemes that are available. As he eloquently described, just a handful of Afghan refugees have been admitted into this country under pathway 3. After all the promises that were made back in August 2021, the Government's response is absolutely shameful. I have a letter from the Minister who responded on that day, which basically dismisses the Afghan women judges. It says:

"The Government cannot...offer a home to all Afghan judges, all female Afghan judges or all Afghan judges."

The tone of that letter was absolutely incredible. The lives of 66 Afghan female judges are under threat as we speak. The Government are not prepared to do anything about it. I am afraid that it is up to us to come to our own conclusion as to why that is.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I call Patrick Grady—the upgraded spokesman.

10.17 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I must apologise to the Chamber; the confusion is entirely mine. You had the correct information, Mrs Latham, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I had not correctly read our Whips bulletin, which is something I am not proud of given some of the roles I have had in this House in the past. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we might have expected to see you contributing to this debate, so it is great that you are able to chair it.

[Patrick Grady]

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing the debate, and on her very collegiate approach to the issue. It was a huge privilege to attend the screening that she and the all-party parliamentary group organised of “Women at War: Afghanistan”, where we heard directly from women who have come here seeking refuge and safety. In the documentary we witnessed the testimony of those who remain in Afghanistan.

I join in the tributes to Alex Crawford for her commitment and dedication to bringing those women’s stories to a global audience. The stories were powerful and moving, and they demand a response. The speed and the scale of the regression and oppression of women’s rights in Afghanistan since the Taliban seized power almost beggars belief. Almost overnight women were excluded from the public sphere, and as months and now years have gone by, those exclusions have become harsher and even more restrictive. UNESCO estimates that around 80% of school-age Afghan girls—nearly 2.5 million—are now out of school. As we heard at the film screening, the true number may be even higher.

However, as we also heard at the film screening and as the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) mentioned in her intervention, it is not uncommon for daughters of Taliban figures, particularly those in senior and leadership positions, to be sent beyond Afghanistan’s borders so that they can be educated. What that demonstrates is not just astonishing hypocrisy but also just how thin the alleged ideology and religious conviction of the Taliban is, because the Taliban’s actions are not about enforcing particular religious convictions but about enforcing an ideology of power and subservience that has no real grounding in the teachings of Islam or any other major world religion.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way; he is making a very powerful speech. Does he agree that the point he has just made shows that this issue is not about religion but about structural misogyny and discrimination against women on the grounds of their sex?

Patrick Grady: Yes. My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right; indeed, I think that point has been made by all the speakers here in Westminster Hall this morning.

However, in the documentary and in the testimonies to the APPG, we also heard about the inspirational women, and men, who are risking everything to continue to provide education, skills and training to others, out of sight of the Taliban. It is often said that educating girls is one of the key interventions that can unlock sustainable and long-term routes out of poverty. But as we have already heard, the United Nations Development Programme estimates that nearly 85% of Afghans are living in poverty, and the Taliban’s actions to exclude women from many sectors of employment has caused, as Members said earlier, a significant reduction in Afghanistan’s gross domestic product.

If we want to see the value of education, we only need to look at Hillhead High School in Glasgow North. The school’s Feminism Club, facilitated by modern studies teacher Miss Thomson, wrote to me recently to

express their solidarity with the women of Afghanistan and their outrage at the oppression that those women face and the denial of their basic human rights. In their letter to me, the club said:

“The Taliban’s regime is hurting everyone in the country, but disproportionately it is women who are suffering...to ban them from work is to force women to be at the mercy of men...to ban girls and women from education is to deny them their dreams of a life of their own...a lack of access to healthcare will see women suffer immensely.”

Of course those sentiments echo the conclusions that have been reached by many international bodies and observers, many of which have already been quoted in today’s debate. My constituents went on to say:

“The United Kingdom is an influential voice in the world forum. We would like to ask you what the UK Government are doing to advocate for the rights of Afghan women and ask you to raise this as an issue at Prime Minister’s questions.”

As Members know, the chance to raise issues at PMQs is never guaranteed, although both the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) have been able to raise the cases that they spoke about today at Prime Minister’s questions. I pay particular tribute to my hon. and learned Friend for the work that she has done to highlight the situation of female judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her work on this issue. I also join both my hon. and learned Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central in paying tribute to Marzia Babakarkhail for the incredible work that she has done, which involves placing herself at risk in order to support others.

However, what I can do and indeed will do in Westminster Hall today is ask the Minister present, who speaks for the whole of the UK Government, what his Government are doing to advocate for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. I hope that when he next meets the Prime Minister, he will let him know that the Feminism Club at Hillhead High School demands action.

Of course, it is difficult to act when the resources available to the Government have been depleted because of the decision to reduce the aid budget drastically, so the Minister urgently needs to clarify whether the Independent Commission for Aid Impact is correct in its understanding that UK humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in 2023-24 will be £100 million, which is less than half of what was provided in the previous financial year. The hon. Member for North East Fife was quite right about the need for long-term budgeting and stability. Even if the aid budget is being reduced, which many of us oppose, there should at least be a planning horizon that people can work with. Of course there are very practical issues about disbursing funding. Nevertheless, the United Nations has appealed for \$4.6 billion to meet humanitarian need in Afghanistan, but it has only received pledges of around 9% of that sum.

However, even where the UK could effectively channel resources, it seems incapable of doing so. Many women in Afghanistan are desperate to access safe and legal routes that would allow them to seek safety and refuge here in the UK, but the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, or ACRS, has been an abject failure, with pitifully low numbers of people coming through it.

We only have to listen again to the speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central, the hon. Members for Twickenham and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis)—indeed, the speeches of practically everybody who has spoken today—to know that. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, almost all of us have probably had a constituency case or have a constituent who has a relative stuck in Afghanistan who wants to come here.

However, the UK Government's position is that Afghans who arrive here through irregular routes should be criminalised and deported to Rwanda. That is the Government's position: Afghan women and girls, no matter their background or struggles, if they arrive here in a small boat or on the back of a lorry, are not welcome and should be deported. I wonder whether the Minister has the guts to get up and say that out loud.

The Government's position is to criminalise women and girls from Afghanistan who come here using irregular routes, and that they are not welcome. That is the language the Home Secretary uses, but whenever I hear UK Ministers denigrate and belittle refugees and asylum seekers, I think of my friends and constituents, Abdul and Khalida Bostani, and their seven children. Abdul arrived in the UK on the back of a lorry, fleeing the Taliban, 20 years ago. Today's Tory Government would criminalise and deport him for that, denying his family the life they have made, his role as a councillor on Glasgow City Council, and the work of Glasgow Afghan United, which the hon. Member for North East Fife spoke about. That organisation works to build tolerance and understanding among different communities in the city, and runs the inspiring women's empowerment programme, which the hon. Lady also spoke about and had the privilege of visiting. Glasgow is a city that welcomes refugees, and as the pupils of Hillhead High School have shown, it is a city that stands in solidarity with the women and girls of Afghanistan.

There is no quick and easy solution to the crisis in Afghanistan, but that does not mean that there is no possible solution or response. The UK Government should be using their influence at the United Nations and elsewhere to hold the Taliban regime to account and to call out their egregious breaches of human rights and women's rights. The UK Government should contribute to multilateral funds that are providing humanitarian relief and assistance to where it is most needed, and they need properly to invest in safe and legal routes that would allow people fleeing Afghanistan to seek safety in the UK, particularly if they have family or community connections, or have previously served UK Government or business outposts in Afghanistan.

As today's debate has shown, there is a cross-party consensus that action is needed, and that the Government can do better. We speak with the voices of our constituents and on behalf of those who have given testimony that we have heard directly from Afghanistan at events such as those organised by the APPG. We need more than words from the Minister. We need action.

10.27 am

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Latham, and I congratulate you on chairing your first debate in Westminster Hall. This is an important debate on UK

support for Afghan women and girls, and I thank Members from across the House for their contributions. In particular, I thank the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Afghan women and girls, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), for securing the debate.

It is almost a year to the day since I visited Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban the previous summer. At that time, Labour urged the Government to set out a comprehensive strategy for their engagement with Afghanistan to alleviate the assault on human rights and the humanitarian crisis that has left tens of millions of people relying on aid to survive. As we have heard from colleagues in all parts of the House, UK policy since 2021 has remained piecemeal, unco-ordinated and inadequate to lift the Afghan people out of protracted crisis, nor has it had influence with respect to the wilful destruction of the basic rights and freedoms of Afghan women, which we all hold dear.

When I visited Kabul, I was deeply privileged to witness the incredible aid work that Britain funds, and to meet a number of women who were at the sharp end of the crisis. I will never forget the time I spent on the wards of a hospital in Kabul. Every bed was occupied, with rows of children suffering from malnutrition. I watched health workers, funded by our country, helping safely to deliver babies into the arms of their mothers.

It was painfully clear how important women are to Afghans' prospects of surviving the humanitarian crisis and to rebuilding a decent future—not just as future doctors and teachers educated in Afghanistan's universities, but as aid workers who help others to access everything from food parcels to maternity care. However, since then, the Taliban's edicts effectively to banish women from public life have risked killing that future—a future we have a common interest in realising because 20 years of progress for women and girls is being erased. There are severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement, their right to education and the right to work. As well as the ban on female university students, which is being enforced by armed guards, secondary schools for girls remain closed in so many provinces.

Women have been prevented from entering parks and gyms, among other public places, and women hold no Cabinet posts in the de facto Administration. The Ministry of Women's Affairs was quickly abolished. Decades of progress on gender equality and women's rights have been wiped out in mere months. Women civil society activists, journalists and human rights defenders have faced harassment and detention. Non-governmental organisations and now even the United Nations have been subjected to the same draconian restrictions. A decent future is impossible for Afghanistan while half of its population remains locked up at home. It is little wonder that many aid agencies have been forced to halt humanitarian activities. Around 25 million Afghans are living in poverty, with households spending over 90% of their income on food. To restrict humanitarian aid and women's right to work at this time is absolutely devastating.

A January 2023 poll found that women could no longer access services from one in five of the 87 Afghan NGOs surveyed. Nearly 60% of organisations reported that their operations had been partially suspended in February. The stark reality is that until those decisions are reversed, many thousands of lives will be lost as a direct result of the Taliban's edicts. What recent

[Preet Kaur Gill]

conversations has the Minister had with international partners about engagement with Taliban officials to reverse those edicts? Can he update us on why countries such as Japan have been able to re-establish some operations in their embassies? Has the Minister advocated for the UN to use its negotiating position with the Taliban to stand up for organisations that employ Afghan women? Later this month the UN Security Council will debate concerns about women and girls. What representations will the Government make to that debate?

The women I met in Afghanistan last year had a very simple message for the United Kingdom: do not forget us. That plea has to ring louder today than it did then. Those women have been out on the streets courageously fighting for their basic rights. We have all seen the footage of women with placards fiercely staring down men armed with AK47s. Those women are formidable and Britain and its allies should stand with them, yet I echo concerns raised by Members today who fear that the Government are turning their back.

The announcement of a 53% reduction in aid for Afghanistan and Pakistan this financial year is of grave concern. We now have the figure for Afghanistan itself from the Independent Commission for Aid Impact and it looks to be a 65% cut—£186 million down this financial year. Will the Minister confirm whether that is correct? Meanwhile, this weekend we have seen reports that the Government's plan for asylum could hit £6 billion over the next two years, with much of that funded out of the development budget. That is almost half of Afghanistan's entire GDP. Let us allow that to sink in. The Government's basic failure to process asylum claims, including those of thousands of Afghans, means that they are now cutting support from the single greatest humanitarian crisis, which people are fleeing.

The Prime Minister had the cheek to claim yesterday that his plan is working. The reality is that 20 months after Afghan families were airlifted to the United Kingdom, 8,000 are still in temporary hotels and the total backlog has risen to 137,000. The failure to process cases has meant that asylum accommodation costs have ballooned. Britain is spending four times per head what it did when Labour came to office, yet Ministers continue to write a blank cheque to the Home Secretary, who seems capable only of making things worse. As the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) put it in December, official development assistance spending has been "out of control". He is right.

Last year our Government managed to spend twice as much on refugee hosting as Poland, where 8 million Ukrainians fled last year and where 1.5 million are still living. The Minister knows that in March, the World Food Programme in Afghanistan was forced to reduce the ration provided to malnourished households to 50% of people's basic nutritional needs, down from the 75% ration that it was providing before that. Households are already spending 90% of their incomes on food. In the absence of a longer-term strategy and knowing how the humanitarian crisis is disproportionately impacting women, can he tell us what the UK support to the World Food Programme will be this year? The Minister of State is not in his place, but I wrote to him about the pressure put on the ODA budget by the asylum system

in March. It is now June and I have still not received a response. Will the Minister who is in his place assure me that a response will be expedited urgently?

Last year the Government promised that they would directly support women's rights as part of the civil society component of the United Kingdom's Afghanistan conflict, stability and security fund programme. Since then the CSSF has been scrapped in the integrated review refresh to be replaced by a new, smaller fund about which we have received very little information. As ICAI revealed just a fortnight ago, the FCDO no longer has any direct programming with women's organisations in the country. For what reasons have the Government decided to completely withdraw direct funding from women's programmes in Afghanistan? Has the Afghanistan CSSF programme been completely or partially scrapped? Will it or its replacement retain a civil society component through which Afghan women's rights are supported, or has that gone, too?

We recognise the policy challenges that the Government now face with regard to Afghanistan. The security situation remains a significant concern, and the restrictions on women's basic freedoms are an obstruction to the country's very future. Progress from here will be slow; however, the ongoing failure of the international community to engage with the de facto authorities and find a way through the current impasse cannot continue. We must recognise that humanitarian aid, while essential, is a sticking plaster, and no substitute for basic public services and a functioning economy. The Government must lead efforts to co-ordinate a global strategy that supports Afghan civil society, respects human rights and sets a road map to allow basic structures and public services to function. The alternative is a permanent crisis, a people perpetually reliant on aid, rising extremism, women subjugated, more instability and refugees spilling across borders.

Something simply has to change, so what discussions is the Minister having with partners about setting a unified international strategy of diplomatic engagement with the de facto authorities? What is the UK doing in the meantime to help, in country, the 1.3 million Afghans who have fled across the border to Pakistan? What consideration has he given to scaling up support to multilateral initiatives, such as the window for host communities and refugees programme and the global concessional financing facility, to support developing countries that are hosting a high number of refugees? Does he accept that the lack of international diplomatic representation in Afghanistan is increasingly problematic?

Where Britain was once a leader, we are currently bystanders, yet I believe that a path through the crisis is possible. Across the country, brave Afghans are making clear their widespread opposition to the Taliban's edicts. Women are standing up to the Taliban in the streets. In solidarity, male students and professors have walked out of universities. Even within the Taliban leadership, reports suggest that many officials oppose the ban. In government, Labour would do things differently. The United Kingdom was the only country in the G7 to destroy its world-leading development Department in the middle of the pandemic, cut lifesaving aid programmes with days' notice and tarnish its international reputation as a trusted development partner. It is investment in long-term development that turns the tide on the challenges

that we face, so our approach to international development will actively centre women and girls to fight for their futures and a fairer world.

We will fix the Home Office meltdown with our comprehensive plan to tackle channel crossings, reform resettlement routes, break up the criminal people-smuggling gangs and address the root causes of humanitarian crises and poverty. In partnership with allies, a Labour Government would develop a strategy of pragmatic diplomatic and development engagement with the de facto authorities to help to restore Afghanistan's economy, uphold women's rights and save lives. We understand that the recognition and protection of gender equality is both a human rights obligation and essential to achieve peace, justice and sustainable development in Afghanistan.

Tomorrow, I will meet a group of 20 Afghan women, many of whom have escaped the Taliban and are now living in the United Kingdom. Brought together by Zehra Zaidi, they are calling for a global summit for Afghan women and girls. They include former Ministers, judges, journalists, diplomats, women's rights defenders, chief executive officers, scientists and scholars—incredible women whom any nation should be proud to have produced and to see fulfil their full potential. As the shadow Minister for International Development, I want to be able to look those women in the eye and say, hand on heart, that Britain did not give up on them and those like them in their hour of need. That work begins by standing up for women's place in society and playing our full part to forge a way out of despair.

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I remind the Minister that I will allow Wendy Chamberlain two minutes to wind up at the end.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Latham. It is good to see you there—congratulations—and I will follow your instructions to the letter. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to her commitment to Afghan women and girls, including as the co-chair, I understand, of the all-party group. I am also grateful for the many thoughtful contributions from hon. Members present. As Members know, the Minister for Development and Africa, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), would normally reply to such a debate, but he is in Cabinet now, and it is my honour to reply in his place.

I will try to address many of the points that have been made, but I will start by saying that between 2001 and 2021, secondary school enrolment in Afghanistan rose from 12% to almost 55% across all parts of the education system. An additional 8 million children, including 3.6 million girls, were receiving an education as a result of progress made over those two decades. By 2021, basic health services had reached 85% of the population, and the number of people with access to clean water and sanitation had doubled. Life expectancy had risen by eight years. Maternal mortality had nearly halved, and infant mortality had decreased faster than in any low-income country. Those are significant achievements.

In short, the UK and our allies, working with the Afghan Government, have given millions of Afghan women and girls access to health and education, and a path to a brighter future. Successive UK Governments invested heavily in Afghanistan and targeted that support towards women and girls, because we all wanted Afghanistan to succeed and prosper, and because, as we note in our international women and girls strategy, we know that gender equality embeds greater freedom, prosperity and security for all. Others have made that point very clearly, but I think the Development Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield, said it all when he said:

“If we want to change the world, we can do so by educating girls. That is the first and foremost way of achieving it, and the Government are absolutely behind that agenda.”—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2023; Vol. 729, c. 677.]

In February, the UN special rapporteur, Richard Bennett, reported that further Taliban restrictions deepened existing, flagrant violations of women's human rights, and, in his words, “may amount to gender persecution”. We continue to support that work, and we look to organisations such as the International Criminal Court to judge whether the actions of the Taliban amount to gender apartheid, a point made by the hon. Member for North East Fife. Taliban decrees limiting women's rights to education, work and freedom of movement have taken a terrible toll on the lives, hopes and dreams of millions of Afghans. The UN estimates that excluding Afghan women from work costs the country up to \$1 billion a year, or roughly 5% of GDP. That seriously undermines Afghanistan's capacity to recover and its future prospects.

In the face of these attacks, Afghan women and girls continue to demonstrate incredible perseverance, courage and bravery, which has been highlighted by all contributors today. Many continue to take to the streets to call peacefully for their rights and the right to education for their daughters. The actions of the Taliban have been rightly condemned by the entire international community, and senior Islamic scholars from countries as diverse as Saudi Arabia and Indonesia have dismissed the Taliban's claims to be acting in line with Islam.

Jim Shannon: One of the things we all referred to was the NGOs and the fantastic humanitarian work they do. For many ladies and girls, that is where they find their employment. Has the Minister been able to have any discussions with the NGOs on not taking away the jobs, but taking away the humanitarian aid that filters across the whole of Afghanistan? There is a bigger picture here, to which the Taliban unfortunately have a blindness. Has the Minister been able to use his influence or the Government's influence to ensure that what they do can be looked upon differently?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Member for his important points. He also made important points about freedom of religion or belief, which he and I support very strongly. I was grateful for those.

In terms of engaging with NGOs, there are pathways to bring food and engage women and girls in that process with a limited number of NGOs, including the Red Cross and Red Crescent. We are doing everything we can to work within those pathways to do that, but this is far from ideal. We are not happy with the situation, and we want to find other ways, but at least there are some limited pathways.

[David Rutley]

While we are talking about the humanitarian situation, it is worth emphasising that more than 28 million Afghans—over half the population—are estimated to be in humanitarian need, with around 17.2 million suffering acute food insecurity. We are working very hard to find ways to get food to those individuals and support them. The UK remains one of the most generous donors to Afghanistan; since April 2021, we have spent over £530 million. Points have been made about the official development assistance budget. It is well known that our aim—the Government’s aim—is to return to 0.7% when the fiscal conditions allow.

The crisis has been exacerbated by the Taliban’s bans on women working for the UN and for NGOs. The UN described the ban on its staff as “unlawful” and it has been unanimously condemned by the UN Security Council. Those bans prevent humanitarian development aid from reaching Afghans, particularly women and girls, and threaten lives in communities dependent on that support, as highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The UK Government continue to provide support despite the bans, and we are working with allies and countries in the region to put pressure on the Taliban to reverse them. The goal for the aid we provide is to ensure that 50% of those reached are women and girls. We achieved that in 2021-22 and are on track to do so again in the last financial year, despite the bans that we have all called out.

Afghanistan is the only country in the world to ban women from secondary and higher education. It is a genuinely extraordinary step. As a parent of four children—two young men and two young women—it is clear to me, along with millions of others in this country, that that is unfair, economically and socially ignorant and completely self-defeating. We know from our consultations with Afghan women, including those in Afghanistan, that educating their sons and daughters is their No. 1 priority. It is key to lifting families out of entrenched poverty and insecure, low-skilled labour.

We support education provision in Afghanistan through our financial contributions to NGOs, UN partners and the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education. We will continue to use every diplomatic and development lever at our disposal to restore girls’ rights to education. We are working with close allies, regional powers and through the UN to press the Taliban to allow girls back into classrooms. In December, we used the Bali international conference on Afghan women’s education to urge regional partners to speak on behalf of Afghan women and girls.

Important points were made by the hon. Member for North East Fife about the breadth of engagement with NGOs. We have had a range of consultations with Afghan women over the past year, both those in Afghanistan and here in the UK. We engage with NGOs in regular meetings with the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group and we organise consultations with local organisations as well on specific thematic issues, such as education, health and livelihoods. We will continue to take forward that engagement. We also allocated £17 million to support regional countries, including Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan, in 2021-22. That aid supports those countries to be better prepared for an increase in population movement from Afghanistan and to deliver services to refugees and asylum seekers.

Important points were made about what we can do to help encourage girls to study at home. We support access to education for girls at primary level through community-based education, which reaches adolescent girls close to their homes. Some of the partners that provide community-based education are testing innovative approaches to reach girls through technology, as mentioned by several hon. Members today. However, we have some concerns around access to electricity and the internet, which make it difficult to scale technology-based solutions.

There was a call to impose sanctions on members of the Taliban who send their daughters to schools overseas. I understand those concerns. We believe it is important to continue to engage with the more moderate members of the Taliban to persuade them to call on the Emir to reverse the edict banning girls’ education. That is the primary focus in that work.

Points have been made on how we can support particular cases. I am with the FCDO, not the Home Office, and it would not be appropriate for us to comment on individual cases. However, we are working hard to encourage and support people to come into the United Kingdom. To date, 24,500 people have been brought to safety, and since April 2021 more than 9,000 people have been granted settled status under pathway 1 of ACRS. Since 2022, the first people have arrived in the UK through pathway 2 of ACRS, and, in the first stage of pathway 3, the Government are considering eligible or at-risk British Council contractors, GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni for resettlement.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am very grateful to the Minister, who is a very decent man and I am sure very sympathetic to the plight of the Afghan women. Will he please take the message back to the Home Office that if it wants to claim credit, rightfully, for those schemes, it needs to create the machinery to enable right hon. and hon. Members to engage with its officials in the way that we did when we successfully engaged over Ukraine? We need that hub back. Please will he raise that point with his Home Office counterparts?

David Rutley: I noted the point that my right hon. Friend made in his short but important contribution, which he has just reiterated. I will take that away and follow it up with the Home Office.

I want to highlight the important work that we should carry on doing to get the Taliban to change course.

Joanna Cherry: I realise that the Minister is not a Home Office Minister, but I feel like I am banging my head against a brick wall in relation to the humanitarian visa. Will he undertake to at least speak to his Home Office counterparts about that? As I said, I met the Prime Minister, who seemed amenable to the idea, but time is of the essence.

David Rutley: Understood. I apologise for not responding to that point earlier. I will follow up on that. There are already pathways set out. I understand that there are frustrations with the pace of the response in some of them, but we are moving forward with them.

I will conclude in order to give the hon. Member for North East Fife enough time to make her concluding remarks. The Taliban need to end their discrimination against and repression of women and girls. They must

allow them back into schools and universities, and lift the restrictions on employment for women. Educated and empowered women in Afghanistan will contribute to economic development, peace and stability across the country. It is clear that without that the country will never achieve longer-term stability or prosperity.

10.52 am

Wendy Chamberlain: I am very grateful to you for your chairship, Mrs Latham.

Sixteen MPs have been in this Chamber either contributing to the debate or chairing it, and if the Taliban had their way more than half of us would not have been here, nor would the two female civil servants and two female members of House staff. We need to think in stark terms about what has happened to women and girls in Afghanistan. That is why it is important that we resist the Taliban narrative, and even more important that we listen to women and girls.

I am hugely grateful to everybody who contributed to the debate. We speak passionately because we care, and we care because this is a matter of life and death for many of the people we have engaged with, and we feel a degree of responsibility to them.

There are clearly key things that we want the Government to consider, and I am grateful to the Minister for committing to several of them. I hope he will take away the APPG's request that the Minister of State, who is the International Development Minister, meet our group—not just the MPs but, importantly, the experts we engage with. That is a very important message for him to take back.

It is clear that the existing schemes are not doing what we want them to do. I echo the comments of the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis): we should do something similar to what we did for Ukraine. Politics is all about making difficult decisions. There is never a right or a wrong answer; there is usually just a less wrong answer, and sometimes not making a decision sends a message. I agree with the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) that choosing not to do for Afghanistan what we did for Ukraine sends a message. I have had people ask me directly to my face: "What does this say? Why are we different?" I suspect we know why the Government are not doing that.

The Government are focused on small boats, and it is clear that there is no political consensus about that in this Chamber. They have talked about the reduction in the number of Albanians, but we know that, from the start of this year, the highest proportion of people coming in small boats are from Afghanistan. We know exactly why that is: the existing schemes do not work, and promises were made to people in Afghanistan who supported us and delivered the 20 years of progress that the Minister spoke about. We must do more; we cannot forget women and girls in Afghanistan.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered support for Afghan women and girls.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Isle of Wight: Island Designation Status and Landscape Protection

11 am

Mrs Pauline Latham (in the Chair): I will call Bob Seely to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Isle of Wight island designation status and landscape protection.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham.

Islands have a unique place in the identity of the British Isles. We are a collection of islands, and some are bigger than others. Our islands are marked out by their sense of history, their sense of community and the uniqueness of their geography, their wildlife and, in some cases, their geology. For my constituency of the Isle of Wight, I will make the case for a specific island designation. I do not propose to have a national park on the Island, but a new designation in UK landscape protection, which I believe should be introduced not just for the Isle of Wight. It would be of considerable benefit to other islands in the UK, and it certainly could be seen as a UK-wide designation, because many Scottish islands may wish to take part. So too might Anglesey and the Scilly Isles, so it would stretch across Scotland, Wales and England.

My plan for an island designation for the Isle of Wight is supported by the Isle of Wight Council and our area of outstanding natural beauty partnership. It would effectively put into law a landscape designation given to us by our UNESCO biosphere status, even if that was initially a shadow designation on the way to becoming something more legally binding in the UK—as we know, the UNESCO biosphere is not legally binding. I know the Minister has heard my argument very recently, and I am looking forward to seeing her on the 13th. I officially invite her to the Isle of Wight, so that she can see with her own eyes some of the points that I am trying to make about the physical unity of the Island. I would be most grateful if she did so, and I look forward to seeing her on the Island very soon.

In support of my argument, I will explain why the Island has an exceptionally rare diversity of animal life, marine habitat and geology, and why I feel it should have been much more valued over the years for its uniqueness and value to the UK than it has been by policy makers. Let me kick off my argument by saying that the Isle of Wight is pretty much geographically unique. In the words of our AONB, it is a microcosm of the whole of England. The east resembles Kent and Sussex, with its thick hedges, copses and woods. The stone walls and small sandy bays in the south, around the undercliff, feel rather like Cornwall. Where I live in the south-west, the windswept chalk downs that roll to the sea resemble parts of Dorset, and the creeks of Yarmouth, Newtown and Wootton in the north of the Island resemble those in Devon.

To pull all that into terms that geographers might recognise—I apologise for repeating what I said in a recent debate, but I want to get this on the record, because it shows the variety of habitats in the Island—we

[*Bob Seely*]

have a broad mix of new woodland; maritime cliff and slope, including our unique chines; soft sandstone, which has been moulded and shaped by waters and rivers as they flow to the sea; low calcareous grassland; our coastal and flood plain; our grazing marsh; lowland meadows; reedbeds; and lowland dry acidic grassland. We have fens on the island, as well as saline lagoons and mudflats. We have coastal sand dunes, coastal vegetative shingle and the lowland heathland. Beautiful chalk downs, with their rare flowers, insects, adders and lovely things like that, provide the Island's spine, which runs from Bembridge in the east, past me in Mottistone and Brighstone, and all the way down to the Needles in the west.

All that is in one compact island, which is 30 miles from east to west, and 15 miles from north to south—from Cowes at the top to beautiful St Catherine's down at the bottom. It is one of the most diverse areas of England and one of the three most diverse areas in the south-east of England, along with the New Forest and Surrey heaths, and I would respectfully argue that our variety of wildlife and habitat diversity is greater than in both of those two places—not that I wish to be critical of them, because they are unique and fantastic as well. Our English landscape in miniature, and our range of habitats, means that we continue to be home to species that are unique to the Island or, perhaps more importantly for the UK as a whole, are not flourishing on the mainland but are either less threatened or better off on the Island. We do not have grey squirrels, although one once got on a ferry and the ferry had to be stopped. We do not have escaped mink or escaped deer, but we do have red squirrels, dormice and water voles. I thank Helen Butler of the Isle of Wight Red Squirrel Trust for the important work that she does.

We have some of the UK's rarest bats; I thank our wonderful Isle of Wight Natural History and Archaeological Society for listing all 17 bat species. We have some unique and highly rare ones, such as the greater horseshoe bat, Bechstein's bat and the grey long-eared bat. Mammals aside, I asked Natural England for a list of rare species of insects and flora and fauna. It came back with 28 species, which include early gentian, field cow-wheat and wood calamint. On rare insects, the Island is the sole British location for the Glanville fritillary butterfly as well as the reddish buff moth. I thank Jim Baldwin for his excellent work in cataloguing the many moths that we have on the Island—not an easy job, but somebody has to do it.

For our birds, the Solent is a Ramsar-designated site, and we have wetlands of international importance of both sides of the Solent. I hope that the Minister will be interested to note that, on the Island specifically—in Brading, Newtown and Western Yar—marshes and estuaries are highly important for migrating birds. We have five that are rare or threatened, including terns, teals and a variety of plover. Brading marshes is a site of special scientific interest, a special area of conservation, a Ramsar-designated wetland and a RSPB nature reserve—it is not in the AONB. Forestry England and the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation reintroduced sea eagles in England on the Isle of Wight, and I thank Steve Egerton-Read, Forestry England's project officer for the sea eagles, for showing me around Barding

marshes, I think about a year ago, when we spotted—I think—a female sea eagle perched on a tree looking for breakfast. Buzzards, once rare, are relatively plentiful, and we have a healthy population of adders.

As regards our marine environment, the area surrounding the Isle of Wight is protected by maritime conservation zones, special protection zones and special areas of conservation. Again, I asked Natural England for a list of species that I should be aware of. It said that there are 26 species around the Island that are nationally scarce or globally vulnerable. We are a relative haven for many different types of species, whether on land or on sea. That is an important part of an island designation for me, because it would include the marine environment, human environment and landscape environment—a bit like a UNESCO biosphere but in UK law.

I shall not list all the very rare marine species, because I am respectful of people's time, but they include native oysters, both our varieties of native seahorses—the short-snouted and the long-snouted—varieties of jellyfish, rays and other species. We also have seagrass meadows in Osborne bay, Yarmouth and Bouldnor. Indeed, those seagrass meadows are being used to transplant seagrass to the other side of the Solent—into the Beaulieu river—so the relative strength of our natural world is being used to support others. We also might be doing a project to reintroduce UK crayfish back into the Isle of Wight, because the UK population of indigenous crayfish has been decimated by the American crayfish, which, like the grey squirrel, was imported and proved to be far more aggressive and predatory.

Geologically, along the south-west of the Island, we have a near complete exposure of cretaceous coast. We have this stuff called wealden rock. It is orange and it produces dinosaur bones. In most of the UK, it flows and undulates well underneath the surface, but it sticks up in the south-west of the Island over an area of about 11 miles, and there is a little patch in Sandown in the east as well. The sea and tides gently wash away that coastline, and that is why we have the richest dinosaur finds in Europe. I mentioned a family dinosaur last time—I will not go there again, because we do not have time. The undercliff, a breathtakingly beautiful part of the Island on the south side, is the most geologically unstable part of Europe.

What does all that mean? I am not just listing this because I want island designation for my constituency—everyone could say something similar about their constituencies, although clearly the Island is unique and special. I am making the point that our variety, diversity and depth of habitats and our different types of wildlife, flora, fauna, insects, and marine and animal life are pretty much unique in the UK.

The Island should have had a special and unique role in this country's protected landscapes, but it has not. Our landscape and natural world has been celebrated by many different types of artist over the years. J.B. Priestley, one of the great 20th century authors, who lived on the Island, said the Island should be Britain's first national park. Sadly, we missed that boat. I am not arguing for that; I am arguing for an island designation. Even before Priestley—he wrote "An Inspector Calls" when he was living in the village next to me—our Island's uniqueness was celebrated by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and by Keats, who wrote in *Endymion*:

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever",

allegedly about Shanklin chine—one of our wonderful geological chines. Britain's greatest artist J.M.W. Turner sketched and painted on the Island. Algernon Swinburne, another great Victorian poet, lived in Bonchurch. Indeed, the Freshwater and Bonchurch sets of the 19th century were heavily influential in the UK. Julia Margaret Cameron pioneered early portrait photography on the Island in Freshwater. In 1850, the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray said:

“Is there no one who is commonplace here? Is everybody either a poet, or a genius, or a painter?”

I am tempted to say, “Yes.”

The Island has one of the most painted coastlines in Britain, along with north Yorkshire and Cornwall. We have not done enough with our artistic and cultural heritage. Sadly, we have forgotten far too much of it since world war two—that is another story.

We have a single Island-wide designation: the UNESCO biosphere, which was awarded to us in 2019, and I thank everyone involved in that, including Joel Bateman, Richard Grogan and many others, but it comes with no legal standing in the UK. The problem is that instead of being treated as a single whole, we had some guy from the Ministry turn up in the mid-1960s and parcel the Island out into five blotches of AONB. I found that incredibly frustrating because people can go to considerably larger AONBs on the mainland, for example, driving through bits of the Cotswolds, and some of it is pretty flat and quite ordinary and boring, but it is part of a greater whole. It is included because it is part of a greater whole and there is a greater beauty around it.

I find it bizarre because if anywhere should be treated as a single whole in the UK, it is a relatively small island, even if it has lots of different types of habitat. It is a single whole with many habitats within it, all of which feed and function off one another. The Isle of Wight has been parcelled as 52% AONB, which is almost entirely focused on lowland heathland. The extraordinary Brading Marshes and the dryland around them were not included in the AONB, and many other parts of the west and the south were not included and are now under development pressure.

We are a relative refuge for wildlife, but we are also more vulnerable than parts of the mainland because we are finite and not that large. As Natural England notes, finite landscape is being damaged at pace. Its report says:

“Urban development is spreading, with waste disposal sites, extensive holiday and industrial developments and caravan parks blurring the edge of settlements.”

In the past 50 years, we have lost some species. The extent to which rural landscapes have been disturbed on the Island by urban development has increased by nearly 30%. That figure was applicable until 2007, and it is worse now. Some of our rivers have been badly modified and damaged.

Even when we are protected by the AONB, we have seen that sometimes that is not enough. There is something I am working on that I will mention because I want the Minister to be aware of it and I have written to the Secretary of State about it. Under section 191 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, there are time limits on the enforcement of planning conditions that prevent planning authorities from taking action on historical breaches of planning. Even if that breach is minor,

immunity can then be granted from planning conditions as a whole, which then permits development that should not take place.

On the Isle of Wight, we have one pretty awful development that exemplifies this problem: Chine Farm. A minor breach of condition years ago involving camping in a field not specified by planning conditions has now been leveraged to permit the siting of static caravans all year round. That is in a site of special scientific interest on a heritage coastline in an AONB. I have written to the Secretary of State on numerous occasions about closing this damaging loophole, which affects me and others.

The purpose of the Island park designation would be to cover the entirety of the Island. It would treat the Island as a single whole. It would unite maritime and landscape protection in one designation, and common sense suggests that on an island this is the sort of unified approach that we should be taking not only to landscape management but to supporting farmers. If all my farmers on the Island could, for example, have Farming in Protected Landscapes funding, they would be able to do things like planting more hedgerows and planting copses, to join up our natural realm into a single whole. We would have these natural corridors, whether hedgerows or copses. In fact, I saw some of those being planted last weekend, at the Isle of Wight sheepdog trials. It was great to see that, and I thank Ian Wheeler very much for his work.

An island park would assume a basic standard, when it came to planning and housing, akin to that of an AONB. If the Minister is asking what an island designation should consist of, the basic building block is AONB throughout—unless there is an exception for development. That is the first point. The second point is better, more traditional standards in planning and beautifying, which is an important part of our planning and housing ideas anyway, of our towns and villages, to respect the traditional building methods, whether they involve traditional Isle of Wight stone, which is pretty much unique to the Island—we see it a little bit in west Dorset—or patterned red brick, as seen in Newport.

That means that large-scale housing development, completely inappropriate for islands, would be banned in favour of small-scale development in existing communities. Pleading an exceptional circumstance, which I hope we have negotiated with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, would allow the Island to focus overwhelmingly on finding homes for our local population and not have to fit into arbitrary targets, which take absolutely no account of the fact that the Isle of Wight is separated by sea and is an island.

An island park designation would also serve as branding. There are 56 food producers on the Island. It would help them to brand their products better, and it would help with tourism if people saw that they were going somewhere that valued nature and had an extraordinarily rich natural world.

How would this come about? The Glover review recommended

“a wider range of...systems of landscape protection”.

I hoped that that was going to mean primary legislation. Might it mean primary legislation? If not, a second option would be to amend the Isle of Wight County Council Act 1971—if I came high up in the private

[Bob Seely]

Member's Bill ballot, would that be an option? A third option would be to extend the AONB, but that is incredibly time-consuming; it takes, seemingly, years—up to five to 10 years. Therefore I am wondering whether there is another way of looking at this by getting some kind of shadow designation, so that if the Government introduced further environmental Bills and Acts in future, island parks, akin to an AONB and meaning higher standards—with opt-outs for job creation, because that is really important on islands—would be something that could appeal, not only to the Isle of Wight but, potentially, to the Isles of Scilly, to the Western Isles of Scotland and to Anglesey. This is potentially a really attractive idea.

To sum up, the Isle of Wight is unique. I do not think it has been valued enough in the last 50 to 60 years. We should have been a national park—we are not—but our natural habitat is unique. The variety of our habitat is unique. The wildlife that we help to protect and that finds a refuge from the mainland of the UK is relatively unique. Our tourism could really do with the sense of the Island being an island park—that is not a national park; it is a different designation. I think that if we could work towards that, it would be of huge benefit. I do not want to see the Island becoming overdeveloped in the coming decades, because that will ruin what is unique and special about it, certainly for as long as we are separated by sea from the mainland.

I will leave the Minister with a final thought. The Government are committing to designating 30% of land as protected. I know that we have our patchwork of protections, but a single, encompassing whole would, I think, enable the Government to meet their targets. In the Island's case, it is absolutely deserved, because of our contribution to the natural world through our different habitats and our geology. Therefore I look forward to the Minister coming down to the Island very soon to talk with me further about this and I look forward to discussing it with her when we meet on 13 June.

11.19 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Latham. It is always a pleasure to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), as he speaks with such adoration, pride and passion but, most importantly, a deep understanding and knowledge of his constituency of the Isle of Wight.

Once again, he has powerfully and effectively set out his case for an island designation. We are looking very closely at that in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and we will discuss it in far more detail when we meet in about a week. My hon. Friend makes it impossible to do anything other than accept his kind invitation to visit the Isle of Wight. I will endeavour to go during the summer recess to visit some projects. I would like to meet Helen Butler in particular; my hon. Friend referenced her work in preserving the red squirrel colony on the Island.

Let me set out some reasons why the Isle of Wight is so special. We have already heard incredible insights about the species, but I also reinforce that we have 41 sites of

special scientific interest. We have a national nature reserve at Newtown Harbour that is managed by the National Trust, eight local nature reserves covering over 1 sq km and around half of the Isle of Wight's coastline of approximately 45 sq km is defined as a heritage coast at Tennyson and Hamstead. In addition, all of the waters around the Isle of Wight are designated under a network of marine protected areas, covering 331 sq km and including three special areas of conservation: south Wight maritime, Solent maritime, and Solent and Isle of Wight lagoons. There are three special protection areas at the Solent and Southampton water, also recognised as Ramsar sites. There are also three marine conservation zones: Bembridge, Yarmouth to Cowes, and the Needles. They represent just some of the unique features of that wonderful place. I look forward to visiting it, especially after a good conversation with officials about the proposals that are the crux of this debate.

I am happy to confirm that we have a meeting to discuss the proposals in more detail and we will be able to understand the landscape and the coastal areas in particular. All of England's landscapes are important, but our 44 national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty are the most iconic and beautiful places. Covering almost a quarter of England, they contain over half of the SSSIs in England, around 542,000 hectares. Many of our most threatened species live there, such as the red squirrel—which has a stronghold on the Isle of Wight—the curlew and the water vole. Protected landscapes represent our shared heritage and national identity, and are also home to our most special rural communities and businesses. I am biased because I live in the English Lake district and know from first-hand understanding, having always lived in Cumbria, just how important protected landscapes are. They are one of the reasons that I am so supportive of the farming in protected landscapes fund, which we are extending and which is open to farmers in areas of outstanding natural beauty and national parks.

Our current and future protected landscapes can play an important role in recovering nature and, by doing so, contribute more to our commitment to protect at least 30% of land by 2030. We absolutely expect them to do so. Over 262 pages, our environmental improvement plan, published on 31 January this year, sets out 10 goals of legal targets on how we will improve our soil quality, air and water quality; how we will increase tree canopy cover; and increase the size of habitats for our vital species in order to achieve the apex target of halting nature's decline and increasing nature's abundance after 2030.

We are developing a new outcomes framework and strength and management plans for protected landscapes. One of the most important additions we are making off the back of the Environment Act 2021, however, is the local nature recovery strategies, which will be rolled out soon across all upper-tier local authorities. I recommend that my hon. Friend engages with the LNRS team, and I am very happy to make that introduction. The LNRS will be the critical linchpin for connecting landowners, farmers, environmental non-governmental organisations, charities, people working with nature, organisations across the island and local authorities and reinforcing how we will achieve the apex target of halting nature's decline. What better place to achieve that than on the Isle of Wight?

We are continuing to make great progress in taking forward an ambitious new protected landscape programme, which was announced in 2021. A couple of the success stories from that are the Yorkshire wolds and the Cheshire sandstone ridge, which are being considered for designation as areas of outstanding natural beauty, along with extensions to the Surrey hills and the Chiltern AONBs. Natural England is fully committed at the moment with its current list of designations, but that is not to say that we will not consider new designations. I cannot imagine a more powerful argument than the one my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight set out. I will work closely with him to advise on the process, and give any hints and tips that may perhaps help him and his island residents.

I understand the challenge of overdevelopment. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight set out some poignant cases, and I look forward to working with the local nature recovery strategy teams, Natural England and his local authority to see what we can do. I, too, value the contribution that small developers can bring to the island, by helping to achieve the priorities that my hon. Friend set out around the designation of an island park or AONB across the island, as well as building homes for local people. Of course, those are also priorities for this Government. The right homes, in the right places, with the right sense of place, are so important; it is important that we have beautiful homes that are sustainable and that feel like homes that belong on the Isle of Wight. My hon. Friend set out his argument about the 56 food producers, and the importance of the visitor economy for the island, as effectively as always.

We will use the all-England strategic landscape mapping tool, published in October 2022, to identify those landscapes and improve nature and access. That is a personal

priority for me, and it is also my responsibility in DEFRA to improve people's access to nature. That is why we have the commitment that everybody, wherever they live, will be able to access a green or blue space within 15 minutes. It is why we are increasing access to walking and cycling, and working with Active Travel England and the Department for Transport.

We will identify further conservation needs across England, including any remaining places that may be suitable for future designations. We will take into account all the information that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight brings to our meeting in the next couple of weeks. I assure him that we will consider the proposal for potential new approaches, alongside other priorities, through the all-England strategic landscape mapping tool, as we drive forward action, most importantly, to deliver on our environmental improvement plan. We have goals for a growing and resilient network of land, water and sea that is richer in plants and wildlife, and enhances the beauty of the natural environment. Ultimately, we set out to leave this place in a better state than we inherited it.

I look forward to the meeting on 13 June, where we will discuss all the options, especially the role of local nature recovery strategies—and in particular, those on the Isle of Wight. We will discuss how we ensure that the valued landscape and coast of the Isle of Wight is safeguarded, as well as my future plans to visit my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight on the island this summer.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Children's Access to Books

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of improving children's access to books.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. It is undeniable that books should form part of our children's holistic education curriculum. What is less clear, but no less true, is the impact of literacy and reading rates on their personal life, their education and their future career. There is no better skill to give our children than a love of reading, and there is no easier way to do so than by ensuring good access to books.

Members will be aware that I recently secured a similar debate that sought to promote school libraries, which are an excellent way to improve children's access to books. To capture the benefit of literacy that reading gives to children, we must have a comprehensive strategy that includes making sure that books are accessible to every child at every stage of their education.

Books play a vital role in our cultural heritage. It might seem trivial to an outsider, but it seems particularly British to me that there was a national outcry against retrospectively modernising Roald Dahl's children's classics. These stories and books bring home the respect and love we have for our books of all varieties.

Books not only have value as a cross-generational medium or because of nostalgic personal value, but because we all know, deep down, that reading is good. It is a simple fact that reading for pleasure bestows unlimited returns for a child's education, their future vocation and their life in general. The best way to give our children the success and opportunities that come with reading is to cut away the barriers that obstruct them from accessing books.

As those present at my previous debate will remember, Yorkshire and Humber, which includes Rother Valley, has the unfortunate accolade of being the worst area in the UK for children's book ownership, with nearly 10% of children, primarily from lower-income households, reporting that they do not own a single book. It would not be unreasonable to think that children with books at home are slightly more likely to enjoy reading and perhaps have marginally higher reading skill than their peers who do not have books at home, but the size of the gap is far larger than could possibly be imagined. The gap is perhaps most starkly characterised by the statistic that children with books at home are twice as likely to say they enjoy reading as those who do not, and are six times more likely to read at above the level expected for their age.

We also might not take account of the impact of these statistics on the rest of children's lives. Literacy has a stark, direct impact not only on education but on standards of living, job prospects and even life expectancy. For example, those with a lower literacy rate earn roughly 7% less than those with an average literacy rate, and 75% of women with a low literacy rate have never received a promotion. Perhaps the most shocking statistic

is that the disparity in life expectancy can be up to 20 years, depending on the literacy rate in the area in which a child was born.

Sadly, it may soon be too late for some. Low rates of book ownership, combined with a global pandemic that disrupted education, means that some children may never be able to develop a love of reading. This is clear from official statistics. For example, key stage 1 SATs results for English literacy fell from 76% to 59% between 2019 and 2022.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech highlighting the vital importance of literacy and the importance of children having books at home. Does he agree that those statistics indicate and support the need for a much greater catch-up programme for children in school?

Alexander Stafford: I have been clear that more must be done, at all levels, to make sure that literacy rates catch up. Of course, access to books is one answer, but we should also introduce measures so that those children who do not have access to books can catch up. Nevertheless, without books at home, at school or at a library, children will always struggle to catch up, so we must deal with the root causes

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is right to highlight the importance of phonics and literature in learning. On the issue of books, it is often the case that young people now engage with their education through digital means. I wondered whether he would address that point when he makes suggestions to the Minister about how we and schools can support young people to engage with literature and the written word through what will be the medium of the future—computers and digital forms of communication.

Alexander Stafford: My hon. Friend is quite right; in fact, I devote a large chunk of my speech yet to come to e-books and audiobooks, and how to use TikTok and other digital means to engage with people. I am sure he will look forward to enjoying that part of the speech immeasurably.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on to e-books, as one of probably the few MPs who has written children's books, I just wanted to make a contribution, first to congratulate him on securing this very important debate but also to make the point that books, in and of themselves, are collaborative, not only for the author in writing them—I worked with my daughter to come up with my storyline—but for that moment of an evening with your child, to spend time to read a book to them. Books are important not just within schools but also for such family moments. There is a really powerful point to be made about the use of storytelling and creativity. Whether it is through a physical book, via an e-book or even by listening to an audiobook, the important part is the parent-child time, to collaborate together and think of new and creative ways to express one's own emotions and one's own story.

Alexander Stafford: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend; reading is incredibly important. Personally, I enjoy reading with my two daughters immeasurably. As a young child, I was read to by my father and other

family members, and such reading creates the stories and images that set you up for later life. I will address that as well later in my speech. We have a long way to go, my friend, so we will continue and go back to my point about the pandemic unfortunately holding—

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alexander Stafford: But before we do that, I will happily give way again.

Patricia Gibson: I just want to make a quick intervention on the point about reading together. I was an English teacher for 23 years, so I can say that children and young people are never too old to love being read to; they love it when they are read aloud to, no matter what age they are.

Alexander Stafford: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Reading aloud is not just a pleasure for the people who listen to the story but for those who read the story. After all, we are all politicians here and we love hearing the sound of our voices. Indeed, I am telling a story today; we are doing storytelling for the future.

Before I continue, I wonder whether there are any more interventions. No? Then, I will happily continue to discuss the pandemic, but first I will comment on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell). I congratulate him on writing a children's book—unfortunately I have yet to receive a copy, but I look forward to receiving one *tout suite* and I thank him very much for that.

I return to the effect that the pandemic has had on literacy rates. What is most concerning is the effect on the 10% of children who spent the pandemic at home without books. When they returned to school, they would have been further behind their peers who had books at home. Children on free school meals are not only much less likely to own books but are much less likely to enjoy reading with their friends—a statistic that has doubled over the pandemic, as children spent long periods without access to books or other reading material due to schools being closed.

As I mentioned in the previous debate that I secured, which focused on the importance of improving access to libraries, something that has been recently reinforced to me is the data that shows that 30% of parents were borrowing more books from libraries than ever before. Clearly, that is paying dividends in my area, with the announcement of a new library in Thurcroft. However, accessing books can be made easier, making it more likely that people will do that than only going to a library.

In my local area, Labour-run Rotherham council has spent millions of pounds on building a new central library, but we are still paying upwards of £5 million a year in rent for Riverside House, the council offices and library, which opened just 10 years ago, few of my constituents in Rother Valley will ever visit it and fewer still will want to borrow a book from the catalogue, which is in dire need of updating. Spending just a fraction of the money that the Labour-run council has spent on putting books into the hands of the children of Rother Valley would be a far more efficient way to improve those children's lives.

Rotherham, as we know, has the second lowest reading attainment levels for key stage 2, something that the data shows us can easily be solved by helping children to access books more easily. That is where Rotherham council should be spending money instead. Luckily, there are easy solutions to these issues, both locally and nationally. One of this Government's greatest legacies will be investment in areas that have been left behind for many years. In some cases, levelling up can mean direct investment and change to infrastructure, as we are pleased to see in Rother Valley with the Dinnington high street project and Maltby skills academy. However, providing books is undoubtably one of the simplest and most cost-efficient ways of improving the lives of 1.2 million children up and down the United Kingdom, giving them the best possible start to their lives and careers.

As was mentioned in the interventions, something that is becoming clearer is the fact that we must embrace technology in our pursuit of improving access to books. Across human history, the first true literacy revolution was the invention of scrolls and paper, allowing quicker, lighter and more accessible reading and writing away from the stone tablets of old. The second innovation was the printing press, bringing books and literacy to the people, as William Caxton did only a few hundred yards from where we sit today.

Many of us have lived through a similarly important revolution in the development of e-books and audiobooks, reinventing the way we read and get information. These new technologies will be game-changers for our children's access to books and for how they read. E-books, which can be as simple a concept as a PDF saved on a phone or on any number of e-readers, allow for quick and free access to books, which was unattainable outside of a library just a few years ago. Not only can a phone or e-reader hold thousands of titles, it is nearly always cheaper than its printed counterparts, often for the simple reason of having next to no unit cost, meaning that they are far more accessible for younger readers in less well-off households. Indeed, many of the classic books that we may want our children to enjoy like we did are available online for free through sites like Project Gutenberg, which boasts over 70,000 e-books free to download, with titles from Marcus Aurelius to Sun Tzu—anything a child would want to read.

For children, there are other advantages to reading technology. A trial programme points to a huge uplift in reading enjoyment across the board when reading on screens. That is backed up by an increase in pupils' reading outside school. Not only do children enjoy reading electronic devices, they enjoy it so much that they do it in their own time. It may be better for their development and preparedness for their careers, with jobs these days often involving reading text from a screen rather than a piece of paper.

Audiobooks should share the stage, given their proven results, encouraging those who might otherwise not read to do so. In the first instance, audiobooks have huge reach among younger readers. A 2022 survey tells us that 40% of those aged between 12 and 15 are regular users of audiobooks, whereas only 24% of those aged above 55 responded in the same way. What is more, audiobooks bridge disparities that we usually see in reading and writing among children. For example, the National Literacy Trust reports that listening is the only form in which boys have higher levels of engagement

[*Alexander Stafford*]

and enjoyment than girls. Audiobooks are an invaluable way of making books and the benefits that come with reading more accessible to those who might normally miss out.

Given that these new ways encourage reading and make books even easier than ever to access, how should we support them? As I mentioned, Yorkshire has the lowest rate of children's book ownership, but given the ubiquity of smartphone and computer ownership and the availability of e-books and audiobooks, the answer is right there. We touched on some of the charitable endeavours in this area, and I am pleased to report that many other excellent charities are helping to spread e-book ownership, including from public libraries.

Increasing access to books means making them as accessible as possible. For more than 350,000 children with some form of learning difficulty, reading may present more of a challenge. How can reading for pleasure even be considered if reading is a constant struggle for these children? I have talked about how e-books and audiobooks greatly increase reading enjoyment, but that is especially true when looking at the impact on children with dyslexia or any other educational support needs, as well as those who simply struggle with reading. One in 10 children have some form of dyslexia. That should not be overlooked as an area that needs focus. Like other areas in life, technology can provide easy ways for many to overcome hurdles. In this case, e-books can be more beneficial than printed books, such as by being able to quickly change font or sizes or access the dictionary to find out the meaning of new or difficult words—a real step forward in helping those most in need of encouragement. The British Dyslexia Association has many excellent suggestions on how to help children with dyslexia to read and write, and agrees that e-books and other such technology are clear game changers for children with dyslexia.

As well as technology, another central suggestion is paired reading, which we have already talked about. A child and their parent reading together for 10 minutes a day is a perfect example. Unfortunately, when looking at the bigger picture, if 10% of children in my area do not own a book, and 10% of those children have dyslexia, that means that 1% of children—nearly 135,000 children across the UK—simply do not have the resources to overcome their learning difficulties, blighting their career and life prospects.

Over the course of this debate and the last, I have had a particular focus on younger children, such as those in primary school. That may be because of my own personal bias with my two daughters, Persephone and Charlotte. Unfortunately, however, it seems to me that the same is true of our education system, which focuses literacy education on younger children at the expense of older children. Over 75% of children aged between five and eight say that they enjoy reading, but sadly that number trends downwards over the next years of education, with only 45% of 14 to 16-year-olds saying the same. That means that somewhere in our schools children lose their passion for reading. Secondary school—for some, the last years of formal education—can be an invaluable time to fall in love with reading before life's other worries take over. We must do more to encourage our teenagers to read and enjoy reading.

The point could be made that because so many forms of entertainment are instantly available to our children—and to teenagers in particular—we should do more to make books relevant and accessible. Here, again, we can look to technology to solve those issues. As I have mentioned, with e-books and audiobooks, children can have thousands of stories in their pocket, but how do we actually get them to open the e-books and read them? The rise of social media phenomena, such as bookstagram and BookTok, have undoubtedly led to more teenagers reading, with some books' dustjackets now proudly marketing themselves as being TikTok favourites.

Social media platforms provide a social aspect to books, allowing users to give and receive recommendations from peers with similar interests, as well as connecting with those who have a passion for a genre or a series of books. The BookTok hashtag has over 143 billion views worldwide, with some of the most watched videos highlighting, for example, books by black British authors or what to put on a summer reading list. Those videos and social groups are reconnecting teenagers to books, albeit in a very different way from previous generations. It is engagement that should be encouraged, and helps to make books and reading as accessible as possible to teenagers. Whatever other concerns may plague social media, this is undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with in the battle for teenage literacy.

Now that I have outlined the importance of better access and accessibility to books, how should we look to achieve that access for our children? The best way to manage it would be through a British book strategy, with the ultimate goal that every child should have many books of their own to cherish and enjoy at their leisure. That would work hand in hand with the overall education strategy, and complement both the Government's education White Paper from last year and the Prime Minister's numeracy campaign. I believe this debate will go some way towards outlining what might be contained in that strategy, and I make the following points to the Minister.

First, we must examine seriously the ways in which technology can help children gain access to books, rather than looking at technology as somehow at odds with reading. I have extolled the virtue and benefits of e-books and audiobooks, given their lower cost and the universal access technology capable of reading or listening to them. They must be front and centre of any book strategy. There are, of course, other ways in which technology can improve access to books that I have not had time to discuss, such as apps for public libraries or technological support for the teaching of phonics.

Secondly—and perhaps a related point—we must work to ensure that reading is not seen as a struggle or challenge for those children who find it more difficult than others. With the right processes, even those with the most severe learning disabilities can be shown the joy to be found in reading for pleasure and so reap the same benefits as those without such difficulties.

Finally, we cannot forget to continue to stress the importance of reading as children grow up. Perhaps, given the proven rewards, reading or library time should be a continued presence in our children's timetable throughout their educational career, regardless of what they are studying, to prevent the terrible decline in reading enjoyment that we are currently seeing. Perhaps encouraging reading-friendly social media may help to

give books relevance to our digital society, and help in removing the barriers between teenagers and reading. That is especially true for those leaving formal education as they turn 16.

In conclusion, the Government's excellent schools White Paper promises to

"do more to ensure every child can access cornerstone literacy and...give them the tools to lead a happy, fulfilled and successful life."

Better access to books is the simplest and best way to manage that. The only tools children need are the books themselves. We know that high literacy and more reading ensure longer, happier and more fulfilled lives, and there is no better way to achieve those things than to put a book in the hands of every child. Next year, World Book Day will be on 7 March, a date by which I hope every child will have a book of their own to celebrate it with—a book to love and to share with their friends and family.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call Matt Rodda.

Matt Rodda: Sorry, Sir Christopher—I just wanted to intervene on colleagues, not make a speech.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): In that case, I call Jim Shannon.

2.50 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Sir Christopher. It is a real pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), who put the case very well, with enthusiasm, energy and passion. It is well seen that he has a deep interest in the subject matter. I am now a grandfather, with six grandchildren, and I very much recognise the interest they have in books. The hon. Gentleman referred to his two children, and that is part of his interest in books. Whenever children—in my case, grandchildren—come along, that deep interest in books is reinvigorated by their passion and hunger for books, and I see that through my children.

Teaching children to read paves the way for their future. It is an essential skill for education, employment and advancing oneself in this world. It is disheartening that not all children have the same opportunities to access books. Poverty has played a significant role in that. Poverty levels in Northern Ireland, for example, are some of the highest in the United Kingdom, so it is good to be here to discuss what we can do to give children equal opportunities. I know that the Minister has a deep passion and interest for this subject matter, and I am sure he will respond to our questions and requests in a very positive fashion, as he always does.

The cost of living and the issues with poverty have meant that so many families are suffering financially. In some cases, they cannot afford to put a meal on the table—that is a fact of life that I see in my constituency office every week—never mind purchase books, which is far down the line for many people. A study has shown that 20% of parents are buying fewer books for their children. That figure increases to 36% among those who are struggling financially because of rising costs. Some 30% of parents have been encouraging children to

borrow books from schools and libraries if they cannot afford to purchase brand-new. The hon. Member for Rother Valley referred to his new library, I think, which has been used quite significantly. In Northern Ireland specifically, more than one in five children are in poverty, and officials have stated that the new figures are increasing. That is very concerning.

One of my constituents—it is always good to give examples, and I always do so when I come to any debate—is a reading recovery specialist and a P1 teacher. She told me that she can tell within the first week which children have been read to and which have not. It tells in their ability to concentrate, understand and engage. We must ensure that that is not a matter of poverty or access to books. If that recovery specialist and P1 teacher can tell me that, it is quite clear that interacting with those children makes it clear what needs to be done.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People has been in touch with me ahead of this debate and it has a wonderful scheme that I want to highlight and to ask the Minister a question about. More than 41,000 children and young people in the UK are supported by local authority vision impairment specialist education services, and around 50% of young people with vision impairment have additional special educational needs or disabilities—the Minister has always been responsive to questions we have asked him about those with disabilities.

The RNIB has introduced a new service, Bookshare, which opens the world of reading and education for learners with a print-related disability, including those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. The Bookshare service is currently used in only around one in three schools and needs Government backing to be more widely used. What discussions has the Minister had with the RNIB about its new initiative, Bookshare? With only one in three schools taking part in the scheme, it is clear that we could utilise better the partnership between the RNIB and the Government to make sure that we reach out to the other two thirds of schools, which are perhaps not aware, or not able to take advantage, of the scheme.

In the UK, about two children in every 1,000 have a visual impairment, and a further 10% are dyslexic. Bookshare currently provides 103 titles and partners with 1,100 publishers, including well-known names such as Taylor & Francis, Springer Nature, HarperCollins and Penguin Random House. I encourage the Minister, genuinely, respectfully and as forcefully as I can, to raise awareness of Bookshare and to initiate the scheme across the whole UK.

I wish to digress slightly, because it is important that I put this on record. Members in this Chamber, and indeed many people outside, will know that I am a Dolly Parton fan—it is not a secret. I think that we are all Dolly Parton fans, Sir Christopher—even you, I suspect. *[Interruption.]* Well, perhaps not. It would not be fair to discuss access to books without raising Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. I remember that, on the day I submitted an early-day motion on Dolly Parton, the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said to me, "You do know that I can access that Dolly Parton Imagination Library in my constituency, and my constituents are doing that." I did not know about that until she told me.

[Jim Shannon]

The point is that the Imagination Library is dedicated to inspiring a love of reading by gifting books free of charge to children from birth to age five. I remember when I did an interview with Sky News one night. We were discussing something else, but this issue was raised. The presenter told me that her children accessed Dolly Parton's Imagination Library as well. It is surprising how many people access that library right across our great nation.

Thanks to funding shared by Dolly Parton and local community partners in the United States, Canada, this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Australia and the Republic of Ireland, there are 2.4 million children registered and 204 million books have been gifted. That is a phenomenal way to encourage children to read. Furthermore, in the US, one in 10 children has been in receipt of a book from the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. She is a good lady with a massive voice. That is why I love her songs, which all relate to life and growing up, and you can quickly recognise that—I do anyway. I will not go through the examples, because there are too many, but her songs become part of people's lives as they grow up, which is why I like her so much. The work that she and her Imagination Library do reaches across our great world, showing her to be the philanthropist that she is and showing, too, all the good work that she does for the children.

To conclude, we should be rightly proud of our access to libraries, but, for rural communities, the loss of the library vans—I remember them well—is now showing in our education system. I understand that there is not and never will be—at least not in the foreseeable future—an endless amount of funding, but the early years are essential, as was mentioned earlier in relation to PI education. We must make sure that those early years are covered and that books are available. I ask the Minister to invest in our future by investing in our children and increasing the access to early years reading. I suspect not only that we could form a partnership with the RNIB and its Bookshare, but that Dolly Parton would be happy to form a partnership with us as well.

2.59 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am really thrilled to be here for what is such an important debate—it is also a really lovely debate in its tone and content—for obvious reasons. Children are our future, and we have to think about how we put them on the right trajectory in their journey in life. Reading is crucial to that.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for securing the debate, but also for his advocacy of access to books. He has been consistent on this, and he is a big voice in this area. If I may say so, it is really nice to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who made me smile with his references to Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Frankly, she is an incredible woman when it comes to philanthropy. She has articulated her world view through her lyrics, but she has also put that into practice in investing in children, which is absolutely crucial.

We can never overlook the investment required in early years, in particular, to give children the best start in life. With that, improving literacy among children and young people is absolutely crucial to ensuring—this is a statement of the obvious—that we have highly educated and highly skilled people in our economy and a functional society. We need to have people who learn from reading, who have inquisitive minds and who hunger for an understanding of good literature and good books, but who also know how to express themselves, and literacy and reading are central to that.

As I was reminded this morning, when I attended a memorial service for a very dear friend, the late Lord Young, the children and young people in our schools today are the entrepreneurs, business leaders, public servants, investors and inventors of the future. If we are not spending the time sorting out our structures and institutions—our schools and everything else—and getting right all the things we need to do at this stage, we are going to lose out on their potential, when we should be unleashing their potential and investing in their talent.

For me as a Member of Parliament—the Member of Parliament for Witham—literacy and improving access to books have been my focus for my schools. Having been elected in 2010, I visited all my schools—we all do and we learn so much, particularly in the early days of being a Member of Parliament—and the thing that surprised me the most was that the level of literacy was below the national average. To be quite frank, every Government can say, “We've boosted the money. We've done x. We've done y,” and all the rest of it, but when I came in in 2010 and heard, for example, about the Building Schools for the Future programme and all the previous investment in schools, it was really quite stark and quite shocking to hear about the number of children in my schools that this issue affected. A lot of this correlated with indices of deprivation, which we have to focus on as well—we have to correct things where we have deprivation and look at how we can do more to turn around outcomes for children.

There were certain schools in certain parts of my constituency where literacy was lagging behind in quite a shocking way. At that time, approximately one in six 11-year-olds was leaving school without the required level of reading. So I worked with local schools and particularly headteachers, and I have previously mentioned one, now former, headteacher to the Minister—a very inspirational lady, Mrs Bass, who was the headteacher at Powers Hall Academy. I set up something called “Get Witham Reading”, which was a literacy scheme to promote reading and, obviously, make it fun. This was all about not only reading in schools, but guests coming into schools. When I say guests, I mean the local mayor and local councillors, who were building bridges within local communities. People came in from the local community to be read to, but also to read to children. Since 2012, this has been up and running every year. It encourages a day of reading activities, and it is actually a good deal of fun.

It is fair to say that I can be a complete pain to many publishers, because I am quite demanding of them. When I run “Get Witham Reading”, I like to give books to schools and I even donate personally to the pupils. I have done that pretty successfully in recent years, and I am hoping to donate over 1,000 books this summer to children in my constituency. There are publishers that

will be written to very shortly, and my begging letters will be asking them to do much more, because I think there is an onus on publishers of children's books. The range of authors, including my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), is really important, because different genres and styles of reading and literacy are just so important to children of all ages.

I have fabulous stories about the way Powers Hall Academy encourages reading activities. It runs reading activities throughout the day, and one of its former caretakers builds things for it. When we had a Harry Potter theme, he built a train; when we had an aviation theme, he built an aeroplane and put it in the playground so that the children had the experience of boarding a plane—they made their own boarding passes and currency. One year, the theme was the Titanic, and the children made lunch for the school guests based on one of the menus on the Titanic. That is exactly how to bring reading to life through great stories and history. Ministers and Prime Ministers have supported that event in the past. The Minister will be joining me next month when we host "Get Witham Reading"—I promise we will make it fun.

These events encourage characterisation. Children use their imagination to bring a character to life—we have had plenty of Harry Potters and characters from "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory"—and staff, teachers and parents join in. One of the biggest lessons I have learned in my time as a Member of Parliament is that parents have an important role in getting children reading at home. We should encourage parents by making them part of the events in schools, and then they can take the books away and read them to their children. We should encourage the presence of more books at home, because many of the households had no books at home.

"Get Witham Reading" is all about encouraging local children and young people to enjoy reading. It gets them away from their consoles—despite the fact that technology is important—and into books. I have a confession to make: in my teenage years, I probably read more *Smash Hits* and *New Musical Express* than I did books. Nevertheless, reading has to continue. That means that we need initiatives to support more books going to schools, and we have to encourage the ownership of books. Young people, in particular, like to own books, and we have to make it easy for them. Of course, donating books is one aspect of that. As I said, I have put in a plea to publishers and authors, and they have an open invitation to "Get Witham Reading". If any of them wishes to come or donate their books, they are welcome to contact me.

There is a marked contrast between the situation back in 2010 and now. Back then, national literacy standards had fallen in comparison with our international competitors, and the Government and Ministers resolved to do a great deal about that. In 2006, we were ranked 16th in the world in the Programme for International Student Assessment, but by 2009 we had fallen to something like 23rd. Bear in mind that this country gave the world Shakespeare, the Brontës, Shelley and Tolkien. If we are not featured in those league tables, what does that say about us?

I pay tribute to the Minister and all Governments over the past decade; their focus and rigour since 2010 has helped to raise standards. In particular, I pay tribute to the Minister for his steadfast commitment. He has written to me over many years about this issue. I have

badgered him, and he has supported my initiatives. He has been very open to working with schools and giving teachers confidence, and I have seen the progress that has been made. We should not forget the impact of the pupil premium, particularly in areas of deprivation. It has enabled my schools to focus additional investment on tackling lower literacy standards among pupils from lower-income households. We are now ranked fourth among participating countries in the progress in international reading literacy study, which is incredible.

My message is that we can never stand still. The Government, the Minister and others have worked incredibly hard over the past decade, but the Government can do only so much. We have heard about great philanthropists and organisations doing so much more. Partners are working with educational trusts to get books into schools. We have heard that our libraries can be slightly more welcoming. In Essex, we have worked very hard to keep our libraries open—I pay tribute to the county council—because they play an important role in supporting literacy. This is not just about the summer reading challenge, which is coming soon. We need reading challenges every single day. We need to set the bar high, and I wonder whether we can do more to tie together the summer reading challenge and the holiday activities and food programme holistically.

In conclusion, we cannot stand still. Generations of children should always feel the benefits of literacy, books and reading. We are a fantastic country when it comes to literacy and our authors, and that is the start of children's journey in life. They can become the entrepreneurs and innovators of the future if they have access to books, and that is something we will support.

3.10 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to follow some excellent speeches. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), who is incredibly passionate about and experienced in this important area. Through the various debates and campaigns that he has led, he has made a tangible difference.

We could not have asked for a more receptive audience than the Minister, who is passionate about the importance of this issue. This should be one of those easy debates in which we all agree and come away with lots of positive things. Indeed, we are in esteemed company, because my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) has written fantastic children's books. They are definitely favourites on my daughter's bookshelf and she often chooses them, so I have had the pleasure of reading them on a number of occasions.

Literacy has the power to shape young people's lives. Through reading, children can improve their knowledge, build confidence and concentration, and inspire their imagination. As the father of two young daughters, I have seen that at first hand. Only last night, I was at a parents evening for my eldest daughter, and the majority of our conversation was about the importance of literacy in building those core aspects. As parents we all want the best for our children, and there is no better way to equip them for future opportunities than by helping them to be confident, articulate and literate. That opens so many doors and opportunities for whatever career path they choose in future.

[Justin Tomlinson]

I have been active on this issue for my entire time in politics, both as a councillor before coming to Parliament—and I was also part of the 2010 generation—and during my time in Parliament. I was proud to chair the all-party group for libraries, information and knowledge, and I was the lead member for libraries on Swindon Borough Council, which included delivering the award-winning new Central Library. I have recently joined the all-party group on literacy, and I host the annual summer reading challenge in Parliament every year, which does so much to inspire the next generation of young people to take up reading, particularly during the summer holidays. Colleagues across the House regularly turn up to be photographed and help to promote that locally, which is hugely appreciated.

My constituency has the headquarters of WHSmith, which is one of the biggest sellers of books in this country. Its chief executive Carl Cowling is passionate about and supports huge numbers of national and local initiatives, particularly through the National Literacy Trust, to help to create additional opportunities. My constituency also has a wonderful independent bookshop, Bert's Books, which achieved international fame in a recent social media post: someone innocently posted a picture of "How to Kill Your Family" and Prince Harry's book "Spare" in the window. That bookshop has bucked the trend and is kept thriving by excellent customer service, a great social media presence, wonderful events for families and people of all ages, and wonderful layout and design. I have seen that with my family: it provides that excitement for children to engage in reading. Finally, the head office of the School Library Association, led by its wonderful chief executive Alison Tarrant, is also in my constituency.

I wish to raise four key points. The first is about school libraries, which I should be less keen to discuss because my first experience of libraries was as a school librarian, and sadly I was sacked. I like to think that my career has improved since then. It is worrying that only a third of primary schools have a dedicated member of staff for school libraries. On average, a library is staffed for less than two hours per day, and two thirds of primary schools do not have a dedicated budget. Ultimately, that comes down to the choices of leadership teams and headteachers, and it is very much a postcode lottery—I have seen that on those visits, and we should do everything we can about it. I commend the School Library Association, which does its best to champion the cause, share best practice and deliver opportunities to make the money go that little bit further. It is telling that those schools with the best libraries have the best engagement—it may seem obvious, but it is not a given. It should be.

Secondly, I want to highlight the importance of engaging volunteers. Many years ago, when the then schools Minister David Laws visited a school in a challenging area in my constituency, the headteacher was extremely excited to tell us about an initiative in which she had linked up with the ladies of the Penhill Lunch Club. On a Wednesday lunchtime she offered them a free Sunday roast, which cost roughly a £1 per head out of the pupil premium budget. Those ladies would then sit and do one-to-one reading with the students who were furthest behind. Pupils who arrived at that primary school were on average 18 months behind, but by the time they

finished their education they had caught up with the expected average. That was due in no small part to those volunteers coming in and investing the one-to-one time that was not always a given at home. We should do all we can to encourage schools to utilise members of our community who have time on their hands and are willing to help out.

I also commend all the volunteers who support events such as the literacy hubs that my office hosts each year in conjunction with the National Literacy Trust: they offer those extra opportunities that are not a given in the family home. I would also like to thank Celia of Imagination Childcare. Beyond her work at an outstanding nursery in my constituency, she puts on sessions for parents that are interactive, that are social and that encourage families not only to read together, but to think about the books: they will pause to do some work around what they have read so far and what they think will come next. That really catches the imagination of that next generation. I commend Celia for all she has done and all the families who have benefited.

My third point is about public libraries. Councils have faced challenges for many generations around funding and changing habits. One thing that has worked successfully in Swindon is that the majority of community libraries have switched ownership to parish councils, which have more flexibility in their budgets. That has allowed opening hours to expand and has created a greater emphasis on community events to increase footfall and engagement beyond the community. They utilise volunteers to deliver books to those who cannot easily get to the library. We have seen a renaissance in usage and book issuing in those libraries. My good friend Michelle Dutton did not follow my path as a failed school librarian: she became a professional librarian. She is passionate about emphasising the importance of matching opening hours to those of busy families, particularly in the evenings or weekends, linking them around events to give families a reason to go there.

My final point is about having an emphasis on new parents. Through the National Literacy Trust, book packs are handed out by health visitors. That is really important, but we should build on it to emphasise what we all understand, so that all parents know that supporting their children to benefit from the enjoyment of reading genuinely opens the door to future career opportunities.

3.18 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) on securing the debate. As has been touched on, it is great that there is so much consensus and understanding among Members about the importance of promoting reading and the availability of books.

I echo the comments that have been made about my right hon. Friend the Minister, whose work promoting and ensuring the highest quality of teaching of reading, and the establishment and embedding of phonics within teaching in our schools, has been so vital. I cannot remember how many years he has been a Minister, but he is knocking up more than 10. During that time, he will have had an impact on children's lives and their

ability to read to the highest level. He has made a real difference to the lives of hundreds of thousands of children.

I will make a few short points, conscious as I am that the Minister and the shadow Minister want to speak. Twenty per cent of parents are buying fewer books today than they did just a few years ago. We are seeing real challenges. As other Members have touched on, it is vital that children have books in their home. Having books available in the home encourages the innate curiosity that every child has to pick up a book and explore it. A new world is opened up to them as they go through its pages.

Dean Russell: May I thank hon. Members for the kind mentions of my books during this debate? On the point about opening up new worlds, we have not yet spoken today about the role of comic books. I am a big sci-fi, comic book and graphic novel fan. At the weekend, I popped into Lewis B Comics & Collectables in Watford—not for a visit, but to see what it had on offer. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must not be snobby about the types of books that will get kids—and adults—to read? Graphic novels and comic books have a really important role to play.

Sir Gavin Williamson: I certainly agree. Getting a child reading anything is an incredibly important start. It fires their imagination, whether it is a comic book or one of the books of my hon. Friend, who is going to pass me a list of all the titles to read out later so we can give them a plug—they are available at all great local bookstores, and probably on Amazon as well. It is about inspiring children. Opening a book opens different worlds. Getting children to lose themselves in the imagination and excitement of a book is one of the most precious gifts we can give.

The sad reality is that children in some of the poorest homes have the least access to books. That is of great concern to all Members in this House. What more can we do to make sure that those homes do not lack books? I pay tribute to BookTrust and its amazing Bookstart scheme.

One area of concern is families where mum and dad cannot read. How do we help those children, at the very earliest stages of life, to discover the joy of books? It has been said to me many times that even if mum and dad cannot read, if they just go through the books, explain the pictures, point things out and tell the story, even if they are making it up with the aid of the pictures, that is an important part of the child's learning. Perhaps we should look at how health visitors can encourage parents who cannot read to understand the importance and value of doing that with their children. It is critical to get books into the home and have that early intervention, because we all know that if children are able to read and to discover the joy of books, it gives them the best opportunities later in life.

Children face real challenges. Of parents surveyed by the National Literacy Trust, 41% said that there was no quiet space for their children to read at home, and 92% thought that it was important for children to have access to a good library. In South Staffordshire, we are very lucky to have a broad spread of libraries. Whether they are in Great Wyrley, Cheslyn Hay, Brewood, Kinver, Perton, Codsall or Wombourne, people can easily access

a local community library. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the many volunteers who go into libraries to ensure that service is available, along with the professional services provided by librarians. Many community libraries, such as those at Brewood, Kinver, Great Wyrley and Cheslyn Hay, are manned entirely by volunteers. Visitors get not only a book, but a cup of coffee, which is a welcome added service. Such libraries rely on volunteers to keep them open and provide that vital service to so many.

Some 73% of pupils who have access to a library attain higher literacy scores than those who do not, which shows the importance of libraries in our communities. Comments have already been made about the importance of having library facilities in schools, but we also want to ensure that there is somewhere warm, comforting and enjoyable for young people, and people of all ages, to go in their community in the evening and at the weekend. For example, Perton Library has done an amazing job of bringing the written word to life, as well as encouraging people through science fairs and a spring watch project. It has brought in partners, including archaeological societies and environmental groups, providing broader-based learning alongside learning from books.

Before I conclude, I will touch on a few brief additional matters. The importance of having a library in every single school needs heavier emphasis. The Minister and I probably agree that there is a certain nervousness about ringfencing budgets because of the problems that that can cause. However, with his longevity of service he well knows that there are many ways in which schools can be gently persuaded, either through guidance or through working with Ofsted, of the importance of having a library. We need to place a heavy emphasis on the importance of having a library in all schools, not just secondary schools: we want the passion and enjoyment of reading books to come at primary school age.

There must be a real emphasis on local authorities, although I appreciate that is not within the Minister's remit. Closing a library may seem an easy choice, but it is always the wrong choice. I ask the Minister to ensure, in the robust, vigorous and authoritative way he does so well, that his fellow Ministers in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which I believe leads on libraries, and in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities make it clear to local authorities that libraries must be protected. Libraries deliver so much to every single child, as well as to people of all ages. For people in later life who may not have the reading skills that we would wish them to have got at an earlier stage, community libraries are so vital in enabling access to great and brilliant literature.

3.28 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I begin, as others have, by thanking the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for bringing forward this debate. I stand to speak as a former English teacher of 23 years, an avid reader and somebody whose life story has been shaped and transformed by the power of reading.

Through a difficult childhood, books were my solace and comfort, and I do not think it is overstating the case to say that books were my life support. No matter what was going on around me as a child, while I was growing

[Patricia Gibson]

up, books gave me an escape, without which I really do not know what would have become of me. Every child should have that escape, comfort and access to building literacy, which cannot be just about what happens in a classroom. The ability to read the words on a page is one thing, but it is another thing entirely to understand how language works, how meaning is created and how language can be used to persuade and manipulate. That can be taught, but ultimately it is inherently linked to someone's experience of reading and the written word; that is the true meaning of literacy and we should want it for all our citizens.

I have discussed this subject with Members from across the House and I confess that I have never understood why folk in England, and MPs in this House from England, do not trumpet more loudly their wonderful literary heritage and canon, as it is hugely impressive; I do not understand why they do not make much more of Dickens, Trollope, Shakespeare and Collins, because I certainly would if I were in their shoes. As an English teacher, I always made sure that every class, from the first year to the sixth year, regardless of ability level, had the opportunity to enjoy a Shakespeare play—I persuaded them that it was an opportunity and they really did not have any choice. I understand that Shakespeare plays were written to be performed, but they are also extremely important in terms of the written word.

I grew up in a home without books, as too many children still do, as we have heard. However, I was lucky, because I was the youngest of eight children and I was often able to top up the three books I was permitted to check out of the local library at a time, as I was able to use the library tickets of all my older siblings. I could also use my primary school library, in which I took such an interest that my primary 7 teacher used to consult me about what books he should buy with the library school budget allocation.

Many other children are not so lucky as I was. It almost goes without saying that children who do not have access to books, are not exposed to them and are not provided with the opportunity and encouragement to cultivate the habit of reading will not reach their academic potential. The evidence on that is stark and unequivocal: reading improves outcomes for children across the board. As a former English teacher, I know that when the new S1—secondary 1—intake arrives, the first piece of short writing we ask them to do immediately tells us which children read and which do not. That is immediately apparent in their level and sophistication of expression, and it is very clear to see. There is no downside to encouraging and supporting children to read—unless we count the numerous rows I got into at primary and secondary school for hiding in the changing rooms during PE so that I could finish the chapter of whatever book I happened to be reading.

Many Members have talked today about the importance of supporting literacy in the very young, which is self-evidently the case. In Scotland, our Scottish Book Trust delivers two universal book gifting programmes funded by the Scottish Government, Bookbug and the “Read, Write, Count” initiative, which supports families in playing, reading and learning with their young children. It helps to instil an early love of reading. Through that programme, all children in Scotland receive six free bags of high-quality books between birth and the age of

eight, with 16 books across the six bags, and an additional two books gifted to expectant parents in the baby box. It is thought that Scotland has the largest universal book gifting offer in the world. Given my lifelong relationship with books, I am deeply proud of that and the transformative potential it provides for children. However, across the UK as a whole, 19% of five to eight-year-olds do not own a single book, according to the National Literacy Trust. That is deeply sad.

In Scotland, millions of pounds have been provided to support our libraries through the Scottish library fund and other such schemes. I wish there was more funding—I genuinely do—but what is important is the commitment and recognition of the value of access to books and promoting reading. That has been established as an important principle. We can build further on that, and we certainly should. I also appreciate the comment from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about Dolly Parton, which we all applaud.

Cultivating the habit of reading is important. Over the years, people have come up with various ways to do that, but I am quite old-fashioned. I do not think we need to rely on children dressing up as their favourite character and such, although I know they take great pleasure from that. If they want to, that is fine; it does not hurt anybody, but a love of reading need not require such dramatic pursuits. Ultimately, it is learned through appreciating the calm, quiet and powerful joy that is found in the gentle unfolding of an exciting narrative captured between the covers of a book, or on a Kindle, or even—as Members have said—through an audiobook, in a way that cannot be replicated through the passive, although enjoyable, activity of watching a film.

As has been said, our public libraries are a real prize in our communities. Aside from the opportunities they provide for social interaction, warm spaces and digital inclusion, which are extremely important, public libraries are integral to our quest to raise attainment. In order to close or narrow the attainment gap, one important thing we need to do is provide access to books for not just children, but their parents. We need to bring parents with us on that journey to narrow the attainment gap. Some of them may have grown up with no access to books, and may not have cultivated or discovered the powerful joy that reading for pure pleasure can bring.

We need to create a wider culture of reading. If we want parents to read to and with their children—as I say, my 23 years as an English teacher tell me that even at the age of 17 or 18, young people love being read to—we need to get parents reading. We need reading as an enjoyable pastime to become normalised in households. Very often, it is not, and we cannot tackle that issue properly or seriously without access to public libraries. In many households, it is now unusual for the TV or the music to be switched off, and for people to sit and spend an hour either reading in the same room or reading the same book together. It is frankly uncommon—I will put it no stronger than that, but it is less common than it ought to be. The role of teachers and school libraries is of course vital, but public libraries allow children and parents to actively and literally discover and explore the pleasure of books together.

Access to books matters, but instilling a love of reading also matters. As an English teacher, I often found that children were very happy to respond to the encouragement to read, and to read independently. However, around the age of 14 or so, the cultivation of

a reading habit seemed to plateau or fall away altogether. There are a number of things that schools, teachers and English departments can do to tackle that, which I do not have time to tackle now, but we need to support and encourage children, and model to them the fact that reading is a joyful way to spend our time. It can be an escape, a solace and, importantly, a companion to us throughout our entire lives.

We should continue to ensure that there are the best, most accessible and richest opportunities to read, but we need to take parents with us. We need to reach out to the parents we have not yet taken with us. In a digital age, reading and literacy has never been more important. Coincidentally, the digital age is also a very important tool to support reading and get our communities between the covers of a book.

3.40 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for bringing forward this important debate. Books are the cornerstone of our education system and how we learn, so it is a pleasure to speak on how we can improve access to books, close the literacy gap and ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive.

I would like to open my remarks by paying tribute to all English teachers, librarians and literacy charities across the country, from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to the Pompey Pirates in my constituency. Behind school libraries and bookshelves is the hard work by teachers, teaching assistants, librarians, parents and volunteers to support child development and literacy attainment. The hon. Member made some helpful points on the value of reading, owning books and the importance of storytelling. I echo the remarks about his advocacy for reading. We have heard a number of interventions and speeches on investing in catch-up, the variety of forms books can take, the value of reading to children, and the importance of independent bookshops and libraries in our communities. I thank all Members for their good-spirited contributions to the debate.

As we heard, books are fundamental to a child's journey in learning how to read and write, but they do not serve that purpose alone. Books open the door to our entire education system: to a world of learning from geography, history, English, physics, maths, music and beyond. Books enrich all aspects of our lives. They educate us, motivate us and inspire us. They open new worlds of exploration and imagination.

For many of us, it is hard to imagine a world without books. It is hard to imagine how we would function without the ability to read or write. Unfortunately, the National Literacy Trust has found that one in four children are still leaving primary school unable to read at their expected level. It also found that one in six adults in England have literacy levels below level 1, considered to be very poor literacy skills. It has been shown that lower literacy can go on to impact every aspect of an individual's life, with negative impacts on personal relationships, wellbeing and further education, as well as a greater risk of unemployment or being in low-paid work. It is a skill as crucial as understanding road signs or price labels, dosage instructions on medicine, filling out a form or making sense of a bus or train timetable.

Unfortunately, in the past decade, it has become increasingly difficult to access books. Britain has faced the closure of almost 800 public libraries since 2010, a decade that saw local authority finances slashed. We know that in schools when budgets get tight, library resources are often among the first to get cut. Recent research by Penguin Books UK shows that one in eight schools in England do not have a library or dedicated reading space. That jumps to one in four schools in the most deprived communities in our country. Teachers up and down the country are using their own money to buy books. The problem is even bigger in primary schools, where one in seven state primary schools do not have a dedicated library or library space. That translates to 750,000 children in the UK who do not have access to books to read through a school library at a crucial age when children need to learn to read, a point made by the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson).

It is no wonder that schools are being forced to make difficult choices when their real-terms funding still remains below 2010 levels. Yet again, it is the most vulnerable who are paying the price for this Government's decisions. While better-off families may be able to provide home-purchased books, those from poorer backgrounds do not have the same luxury. One in three parents who are struggling financially because of the cost of living crisis have said that they are buying fewer books for their children as a result. Experiences of financial strain have a direct impact on literacy, with families not being able to afford books and having less time and energy to spend on reading. Two in five disadvantaged children leave primary school unable to read at the expected level.

The Government claim that literacy is a priority. Their levelling-up White Paper

"set a new national mission to ensure that 90% of children leaving primary school in England are reaching the expected standard in reading, writing, and maths by 2030."

Yet the share of pupils leaving primary school meeting literacy and numeracy benchmarks fell from 65% in 2019 to 59% in 2020. The Government's target is a far cry from reality. Children are moving backwards in their achievements, and the attainment gap is growing.

The problem is compounded by crisis in the recruitment and retention of teachers and the lack of budget available for specialist school librarians. Last year, more teachers left our schools than joined initial teacher training courses. The Government fell 16% short of their target for English teachers, and this year, the National Foundation for Educational Research predicts that the Government will fall 30% short of their targets.

Matt Rodda: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. A headteacher in my constituency, which may be typical of many parts of the south-east of England, recently told me that she had one applicant for a job. Unfortunately, that is the level of difficulty that our schools face. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, and I look forward to the Minister's response and to hearing more about how the Government will tackle this severe recruitment and retention crisis.

Stephen Morgan: My hon. Friend is a tireless champion for schools in his constituency, and we absolutely have a teacher recruitment and retention crisis in our country. We need to look very boldly at some of the solutions to address that crisis.

[Stephen Morgan]

The first step to addressing the problem is to ensure that children are taught how to read and write properly. That fundamental skill must be given the attention it deserves, which means schools having the necessary resources to do so, with children being taught by experts, not by overstretched teachers covering for their colleagues. That is why Labour has committed to ensuring that every pupil is taught by specialist teachers in each subject, including English. We will do that by recruiting thousands of new teachers across the country, making sure that schools are not understaffed, that English classes are not being taught by cover staff or other subject specialists, and that teachers are not burned out by doing multiple people's jobs. Once in our schools, we will also support teachers with an entitlement to ongoing training.

We want every young person to have the opportunity to succeed academically and in life. As has been outlined today, central to that is developing their reading and writing skills, which open the door to our education system and to a world of further learning. Their ability to read and write is a bridge to the ability to explore, create, innovate, imagine and thrive.

As we have heard, all children deserve to have their lives enriched by books, for their health, for their future and their future life chances, and for their enjoyment. The importance of access to books to literacy levels is simply too great to be met with empty targets and empty rhetoric. In his response, I therefore hope that the Minister will outline what his Department is doing to improve children's access to books, to decrease the number of children leaving primary school without the required standard of literacy, to recruit its target number of English teachers, and to retain the brilliant English teachers already in the profession.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's remarks, and I restate my thanks to all Members who have contributed to this debate.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Sir Christopher. The subject of the debate is of enormous importance, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford) for securing it, for the way in which he introduced it, and for his work as an active champion for literacy in his constituency.

I totally agree with the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) about the importance of children of all ages being read to, instilling in them a love of reading and improving their vocabularies. I look forward to visiting the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) later this year to see "Get Witham Reading". I pay tribute to her passion in ensuring that children in her constituency read well and have access to books. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) for his commitment to high-quality education in his constituency, about which we talk regularly—not just general education, but reading in particular.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley says that we should improve children's access to books. I wholeheartedly agree. That is why we have strengthened

the national curriculum to focus on developing reading, and putting phonics at its heart, to ensure that children can read. Reading is the principal way to acquire knowledge, and the national curriculum encourages pupils to develop the habit of reading widely and often, both for pleasure and for information, and to develop a love of reading.

The texts that young people read play a significant part in their wider development, broadening their horizons and introducing new ideas and perspectives. As a child, I loved C.S. Lewis, C.S. Forester, E. Nesbit and L.P. Hartley, and today, I am ploughing my way through the 97 books that have won a Pulitzer since the introduction of the fiction prize in 1919. Charities such as World Book Day and the National Literacy Trust work tirelessly to raise the profile of reading for pleasure in our country, and for that I thank them and recognise their enormous contribution.

The Government are committed to continue raising reading standards. We place great focus on ensuring that early reading is taught well from the very beginning of a child's time at school. Following that focus, and the commitment of hundreds of thousands of teachers up and down the country, England came fourth of 43 countries that tested children of the same age in the 2021 progress in international reading literacy study. The results were published only last month, and I am grateful to all the primary schoolteachers and teaching assistants whose commitment to reading and embracing the phonics approach introduced by the Government made that possible. Indeed, the strongest predictor of PIRLS performance was the year 1 phonics screening checkmark, with higher marks predicting higher scores. England's average PIRLS score of 558 was significantly above the international median of 520 and the European median of 524, and significantly higher than all other participants testing at the same age, with the exception of Singapore, Hong Kong and Russia. There were very high PIRLS scores in Northern Ireland, and I pay tribute to teachers there for their achievement in the study.

That success in PIRLS follows the Government's greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum, with a particular focus on phonics. It also follows reforms such as the English Hubs programme, the introduction of a phonics screening check in 2012, the reading framework, and the leading literacy national professional qualifications for teachers. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley mentioned the importance of children having books at home, and the correlation between book ownership and educational success. In the 2021 PIRLS, overall performance was strongly associated with the number of books that pupils had in their homes. The average score of pupils in England with fewer than 10 books in their home was 507 points, compared with an average score of 591 points—down from 598 in 2016—for those with more than 200 books at home.

The English hubs programme is designed to spread best practice in how schools teach their pupils to read. So far, it has supported 1,600 schools intensively, with a focus on supporting children who are making the slowest progress in reading, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds. That includes schools in Rother Valley, which are supported by two of our English hubs: Learners First and St Wilfrid's. Between them, those two hubs have supported more than 100 other schools in the area. Schools supported intensively as partner schools by English hubs outperform non-partner

schools by about seven percentage points when comparing the change in the year 1 phonics screening check. We have also introduced the reading framework, which is guidance for schools that was first published in 2021. Over 90% of schools have read the framework, which provides guidance to schools about how to improve the teaching of reading.

My hon. Friend also raised his concerns about provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities, particularly children who have chronic fatigue syndrome or Addison's disease and who suffer from migraines. The next reading framework will include guidance on supporting children who are struggling to read, including those with special educational needs, and we regularly speak to experts, including SEND specialists, specialist schools and English hubs, about the way in which the Department can support teachers to ensure that children with dyslexia and other learning difficulties can progress well in their reading and meet the expectations by the time they leave primary school.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not, because there are only four minutes left in the debate.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised the important issue of children with visual impairment, and I will ask my officials to engage with the RNIB about the most effective way of harnessing the power of digital media to improve literacy, including through the use of audio books.

The Department also recognises the vital importance of the teaching profession and is committed to offering the very best professional development. As part of our long-term education recovery plan, we announced £184 million of funding to deliver 150,000 fully funded training scholarships for national professional qualifications by the end of 2024. To incentivise small schools to participate, the targeted support fund provides an additional grant for every teacher who participates in the national professional qualifications in the next year. We also have a national professional qualification for leading literacy, which was launched in October last year, to train existing teachers to become literacy experts who will drive up standards in the teaching of reading in their schools and improve outcomes for every child.

The Government believe that all pupils deserve to be taught a knowledge-rich curriculum that promotes extensive reading both in and out of school. The national curriculum promotes reading for pleasure, and evidence shows that that is more important for children's educational development than, for example, their parents' level of education. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) about

the importance of libraries in increasing children's access to books and promoting reading for pleasure, whether in schools or through public libraries.

Libraries are particularly important in ensuring children have access to books during the current difficulties surrounding the cost of living. A national literacy survey conducted in December last year, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley referred, reported that nearly 30% of parents stated they were borrowing more children's books from libraries and that a quarter said they were asking their children to borrow more books from school libraries. Of course, it is for individual schools to decide how best to provide and maintain a library service, which is something to which my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire alluded. I enjoyed working with him at the Department for Education for a few years; we worked very well together, and I pay tribute to him for his time at the Department for Education. Many headteachers recognise the important role that school libraries can play in improving literacy by ensuring that suitable library facilities are provided.

There are several schemes that look to improve reading for pleasure and children's access to books in school and public libraries. First, the Reading Agency's summer reading challenge, to which hon. Members referred, is the biggest reading-for-pleasure programme for primary school-aged children. Each year the challenge motivates over 700,000 children of all abilities to read for enjoyment over the summer holidays. I also highlight the National Literacy Trust's primary school library alliance partnership, which aims to bring partners together to transform 1,000 primary school libraries by 2025, providing them with books, training and support. Partners include World of Stories, the Marcus Rashford Book Club and "Raise a Reader" Oxfordshire. The partnership reported in November last year—a year after launch—that it had worked with over 330 schools and reached over 120,000 children across the country.

The Department is committed to improving literacy for all pupils, because unless children learn to read, they cannot read to learn. Reading is an essential foundation of success in all subjects, and we are determined to drive progress still further in the years ahead.

3.59 pm

Alexander Stafford: I thank everyone who took part in this important debate. There is clearly cross-party consensus on the importance of access to books, not just at school but in the home, whether that is being gifted books by libraries or charitable organisations—the Dollywood Foundation was mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—or reading with parents, guardians and community groups.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Immigration Rules: Offshore Workers

4 pm

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of immigration rules affecting offshore workers.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. The “Saudi Arabia of wind” was how the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) described the potential of the offshore wind sector—perhaps one of his few boasts with which I agreed. One new offshore wind farm alone, Berwick Bank in the Firth of Forth, off my constituency in East Lothian, would provide enough electricity to power more households than Scotland possesses. In energy-rich Scotland, however, folk find themselves fuel poor. That, though, is a separate debate.

The opportunities of offshore wind are much more than simply lower power costs for our people. They must encompass work for individuals and communities, especially where old industries are gone or are being scaled down. It should be a renewable energy revolution, creating new types of work and jobs for young people, as well as retraining those in sectors such as fossil fuels, where a transition is as necessary for our planet as it is for our country. A just transition has been promised, and that must be more than just a glib phrase.

There are almost 50,000 offshore oil and gas workers in the UK. As their work ceases—as it will, with only the pace of it subject to debate—there is a duty to provide for them. They have given so much in recent years, often in very trying and dangerous circumstances. Of course, it is not just in offshore wind that other opportunities will now arise; there may be opportunities in carbon capture and storage or hydrogen. There are skills gaps now and no doubt there will be in future years. It is right that there should be an immigration and visa system to provide for them. Our economy and our environment demand no less.

This debate is therefore not anti-immigration. Instead, it is anti-worker exploitation. Exploitative employers must not be allowed to undermine UK employment laws and import low-paid migrant labour as a matter of course, and on terms and conditions unacceptable on the UK mainland or even in the oil and gas sector. That would be an abuse of desperate people, and a shameful sell-out of the rights of our own workers.

It is not alarmist to warn of the dangers. We have already seen the hollowing out of the UK merchant marine sector over recent years: 85% of seafarers in the UK shipping industry are non-UK nationals. More recently, we have seen the abomination of the P&O scandal—a disgrace acknowledged by this Government. This is not “stop the boats”, but save the Scottish and UK seafarers, and those classified in that category. It has already been happening in the offshore sector.

Next to the Berwick Bank offshore wind field in the Firth of Forth lies the Neart na Gaoithe field. Compounding the insult of turbines not being constructed locally was the injury to UK and Scottish seafarers who were laid off and replaced by cheap south Asian labour. Many had moved to work there from oil and gas, as a constituent of mine did, seeing it as an opportunity to be closer to home.

There is a grave risk that what happened in Neart na Gaoithe will be replicated elsewhere. UK seafarers and other offshore wind sector workers are being supplanted by foreign labour. I do not mean essential skills that can only be obtained on a global basis and are required for development and operation. Instead, it is foreign labour, exploited and working for rates of pay and under terms and conditions that would be unacceptable on the UK mainland or in the oil and gas sector.

The Neart na Gaoithe debacle came about as a result of the extension of the offshore workers exemption, which was initially the subject matter of the debate. That loophole has thankfully since ended, though too late to provide any satisfaction for those who lost their jobs. It is interesting to note, though, that RenewableUK wrote to the then immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), in August 2021 suggesting ending the waiver for migrant labour in the sector. It also stated that UK workers were losing out on contracts to construct

“UK offshore wind farms to workers from as far afield as Asia, where regulations are less robust, thus creating an unlevel playing field for British firms.”

The letter went on to narrate how UK jobs were lost as a result of a subcontractor.

That shows that immigration restrictions are not damaging to the interests of responsible UK employers or indeed any other nation’s responsible employers; they are damaging only to unscrupulous ones from anywhere. That warning was sadly ignored. A refusal to disclose the number of jobs in construction and maintenance of offshore wind farms filled by migrant labour under the initial concession compounded that problem.

Now, the 2017 offshore wind workers immigration rules concession has been replaced with the Immigration (Offshore Worker Notification and Exemption from Control (Amendment)) Regulations 2023. The regulations, though, leave a gap. It is one thing that foreign seafarers simply passing through UK waters are not covered—that is understandable and quite appropriate. However, the definition of foreign seafarers

“passing through UK waters from non-UK waters to a place in the UK or vice versa”

leaves open the opportunity for exploitation in the sector. Will the Minister undertake to address that loophole?

Moreover, as well as the numbers employed in the sector growing, the nature of the work will also develop and change. New technology such as floating offshore wind turbines allow for expansion far beyond the limits of territorial waters. Ships and support vessels will be operating further out at sea and, rather than them being serviced from onshore ports, there will be flotels, offshore living platforms and ships moored nearby for workers to live and work on. The expansion beyond UK territorial waters—the 12-mile limit that applies from the coastal shore—will also bring issues that need addressed. The issue is less serious within territorial waters, though significant risks still apply. Let me explain.

Even with the ending of the offshore workers extension, it is not difficult for employers to recruit cheaper foreign labour—it is already happening with foreign labour in the UK on visas living onshore when not working offshore. Most worrying is the potential exploitation in

the sector outwith territorial waters, where many of the new wind farms will be located: beyond the 12-mile limit, yet still within the 100-mile UK exclusive economic zone. Some working there will be seafarers. Others, though, will have other skills but may operate on ships or vessels for the sector. As things currently stand, they may find themselves classified in law as seafarers or considered to be operating under international maritime laws.

We already know that issues exist with health and safety legislation as the recent Valaris 121 tragedy confirmed. When a ship or platform is not attached to a turbine, it is not UK health and safety laws that apply but international maritime law. That absurdity has seen the loss of a UK seafarer's life in an accident only 100 miles from Aberdeen under the jurisdiction of Liberia: a country on the west coast of Africa. That is not just wrong—it is perverse. Hopefully, though, coming discussions will address that.

However, as with health and safety legislation, so with employment legislation, whereby the national minimum wage does not apply for those operating outwith territorial waters yet still doing so within the UK's exclusive economic zone. Of course, some responsible employers even apply the living wage across their supply chain, although monitoring and enforcement of it can be problematic. Surely, though, employment legislation that applies in the UK should extend to this sector? After all, steps were rightly taken to extend such protections to the oil and gas sector when it first took off.

As well as ensuring that existing UK workers' rights are protected in the new sector, there needs to be action so that immigration laws apply to the sector. Recently published Government guidance to immigration staff on incoming labour to the UK only refers to "continental shelf workers". As with the health and safety situation, there is a failure to provide for the new offshore wind sector. The definition of a continental shelf worker comes from the Petroleum Act 1998 and relates to those operating in the oil and gas sector. To be fair, when that legislation was written, the technology for offshore wind, let alone for floating offshore wind, had not even been thought about. As a result, there is no guidance that applies for immigration officials when labour is recruited for the offshore wind sector. That appears to be an oversight, even if there is an understandable reason for the failure.

However, it must be noted that section 87 of the Energy Act 2004 applies civil law to renewable energy installations. That specifically includes those outwith the 12-mile territorial limit and within the exclusive economic zone. No doubt that was done to protect the interests of the corporations involved in the offshore sector. They need to be able to litigate for damages, to enforce contracts, and to preserve their proprietary and economic rights. I accept that recourse to UK courts and the imposition of UK laws is sensible and required. The rule of law is fundamental for commerce and trade. But the rule of law is equally necessary in civil society and for our citizens as much as for our corporations. Extending coverage of existing laws and providing recourse to courts should therefore apply to workers' rights and safety, just as it does for economic development and corporate profits. Rights applied in the oil and gas sector must be replicated in the offshore wind sector, and agreements between trade unions and employers should similarly apply.

The danger is that in order to maximise profits unscrupulous employers will seek to import foreign labour, who will work under terms and conditions that we as a country would not tolerate, either on our land or in the oil and gas sector. Those working on ships or based in flotels or other vessels in the exclusive economic zone will be denied those rights. As things stand, employers will not even have to go through the relatively minor hoops and hurdles that apply for migrants working within the territorial limit.

As I said at the outset, this speech is not anti-immigration; Scotland requires new people. This speech is anti-exploitation of workers, protecting those entitled to a just transition and others who are simply seeking a start in the natural bounty that is off our shores. Also, though, it is about protecting workers from abroad who are so desperate for work that they are prepared to accept terms and conditions of employment that we already consider unacceptable on our land and in other sectors.

We must ensure that what happened in Neart na Gaoithe or with P&O, which was even worse, is not repeated. This issue is about the protection of workers in our growing offshore wind sector, whether they are from this country or from abroad but working here. There is ample opportunity to do both, because even after providing employment for all the current oil and gas workers, as well as creating new jobs for others of all ages, there will still be a need to bring in migrants to work. However, that should happen where skills are missing or labour is just not to be found. It should be about economic necessity, not the circumvention of hard-won and vital individual and collective rights. Equally, as we have heard from RenewableUK, this is about protecting responsible employers from those who are unscrupulous. The rights and laws that we have onshore, which have also operated in the oil and gas sector, must be extended to the offshore sector within and without territorial waters.

Will the Minister ensure that UK immigration rules applying to the offshore sector secure the protection of UK workers by basing this on specific need where skills shortages have been identified? Moreover, will he ensure that they are temporary regulations, and subject to regular oversight and transparency? Finally, will he require employers of migrant labour to adhere to the UK employment laws and the national minimum wage that we expect to be enforced on the UK mainland, on our islands, and in our oil and gas sector?

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Before I call the hon. Gentleman, I need to know that both the mover of the motion and the Minister are happy that he should make a short speech. Is that the case?

Kenny MacAskill *indicated assent.*

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp) *indicated assent.*

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Thank you. I call Karl Turner.

4.15 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Thank you very much, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) not just for allowing me the opportunity to speak briefly, but for securing this incredibly important debate.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the scandal of P&O Ferries sacking 800 British seafarers a little over a year ago. The anniversary of that terrible event in British maritime history and industrial relations was on 17 March. That was the 12-month anniversary of 800 people being sacked and thrown on the scrapheap over a Zoom call. It was utterly deplorable. I am afraid that the Seafarers' Wages Act 2023 that the Government brought forward with a view to sorting out that travesty simply does not cut the mustard. The reality is that there is still a legislative lacuna and the Act that was brought forward to sort it out simply does not do the trick.

I mention the P&O issue because it is incredibly relevant to this. It is clear that we need a smarter immigration system, and we desperately need Government investment to retrain offshore workers. We also need investment from the private sector in the maritime industry, but the Government have to help. They have to put their hands in their pocket and put up some moneys to retrain people and skill them up to work in the offshore sector. Regrettably, they have not done that.

I have lost count of the number of times I have spoken with Immigration Ministers over recent years and they have assured me—privately, very often—that they intend to address the issue of continually extending the regulations to, in effect, allow foreign workers to come into this country, work in the offshore sector and, frankly, work for an awful lot less than they would be expected to earn if they were British seafarers.

I ask the Minister: what do we need? By the way, I thank him for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate. What we need is sectoral collective bargaining in the offshore wind sector. That would prevent the undercutting of pay and conditions in this growing industry. There are huge opportunities for people who go to school in the constituency of the hon. Member for East Lothian and, indeed, in mine. Kids could look forward to prosperous, good careers working in the offshore sector, but we need such a collective bargaining agreement to make that happen.

By the way, I have been involved in this stuff for many years now, and any suggestion that this would be challenged and is impossible because the UN convention on the law of the sea would prevent such a collective bargaining agreement is just utter nonsense. That is simply not right. If the Minister is about to be briefed by civil servants saying, "Well, there's a problem with that, because the UN convention on the law of the sea prevents such collective bargaining agreements", that is simply not right. There is nothing in international law or, indeed, domestic law that says that that would be an issue. I pray that the Government get a grip on the situation. They should not continually extend the regulations to allow offshore workers to come in and do these jobs. I do not think that it is a problem—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is eating into valuable time. He is probably right that we should allow the Minister to respond to this debate now.

Karl Turner: I am very grateful to you, Sir Christopher. Very briefly, the Government need to do much more to address this issue. It has continued for long enough. They need to get a grip.

4.20 pm

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Chris Philp): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill) on successfully securing this afternoon's debate.

I shall start by saying that I appear in place of the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who, unfortunately, cannot be here this afternoon. He takes a close interest in this debate and will, I know, be reading it afterwards. Having that in mind, I hope that Members will forgive me if there are occasions when my detailed knowledge is not as acute as that of my right hon. Friend.

Let me address one or two of the points that the hon. Member for East Lothian made at the start of his speech about the United Kingdom's aspirations around renewable energy and the progress that we have made in that area. Members will be aware that, back in 2012—just 11 years ago—43% of this country's electricity generation was from coal-fired power stations, the most polluting form of power generation. Last year, it was just 1.5%, which is a fantastic reduction. If other countries emulated our example, things would be a lot better.

Last year, 48.5% of our electricity generation came from zero-carbon sources. In the first quarter of 2023, wind energy generated 32% of our electricity. It was the largest single contributor to electricity generation. All of us can be very proud of the enormous progress made by the United Kingdom in generating non-polluting forms of electricity, which means that we do not have to import gas or oil from sometimes unreliable countries. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming the phenomenal progress made by the United Kingdom.

Let me turn now to the topic of the debate, which is the immigration rules affecting offshore workers. I will be completely clear with Members that the immigration rules applying to those people working in our territorial waters are precisely the same now as those applying to people working on land. We made that expressly clear through section 43 of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which, I am glad to say, came into force in April—in my previous incarnation, I was the Minister for that Bill. Section 43 of the Act makes it absolutely clear that foreign nationals working in our territorial waters need our permission to do so—they need a visa in exactly the same way as foreign nationals working on our land do. That has been made absolutely clear now in legislation.

As the hon. Gentleman alluded to, there have in the past been particular exemptions for offshore wind farm workers. I know that he has been an extremely eloquent and I might even say persistent advocate on that point, and, as he said in his speech, that exemption was

discontinued relatively recently. His representations over a period of months, or probably even years, have contributed to the thinking on that topic.

On the matter of skilled worker visas, which apply both on land and in our territorial waters, there are some fairly clear rules around salary thresholds, English language requirements and the level of skill that a worker must have. The Government are advised on that, of course, by the Migration Advisory Committee. It is fair to say that the immigration figures that came out a week or two ago were higher than the Government wished in a number of categories, including skilled workers. The Government's policy is to try to ensure that jobs are filled first by United Kingdom residents. We have plenty of people here who are economically inactive—many are claiming benefits—and we would like to see them employed first in our economy, whether onshore or offshore. I assure hon. Members that we want more UK resident workers to fill vacancies, as opposed to immigration filling them, whether onshore or offshore. On that point, the hon. Member for East Lothian and His Majesty's Government are as one. Of course, those rules—the salary thresholds and so on—are kept continuously under consideration.

I will first address the point about territorial waters, and then I will talk about the exclusive economic zone. Often, the people in those waters are transiting, working in those waters or stopping off at a UK port in the course of making a passage from one place to another, so the rules governing people in transiting ships of different kinds necessarily need more latitude than those we apply to people working on terra firma. That is why there is a little more latitude in those cases, but it is not without limitation, and we do not want it to be abused. If there are points of detail that need fine-tuning, the Minister for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark, is always willing to engage in dialogue to ensure the rules are not in any way being misused. I am not aware of any evidence that they are,

but if the hon. Member for East Lothian has any points about the details of that, I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark will be happy to enter into dialogue about that.

The exclusive economic zone is the area of sea outside territorial waters—more than 12 miles from the high water mark, but less than 100 miles from the coast. International law confers upon it particular economic rights in relation to what is found under the sea—for example, oil in the North sea—but it does not confer a power of sovereignty over what happens on the surface. That therefore severely limits—indeed, largely excludes—our ability to impose economic or labour market regulation on activity in the exclusive economic zone outside territorial waters.

A point was made about sectoral collective bargaining. I suspect that falls under the policy ambit of another Department—probably the Department for Business and Trade—so I do not wish to trespass on its territory, save to say that, regardless of the technicalities in international law, the Government are not generally huge fans of imposing collective bargaining on particular bits of industry. We much prefer individual employers to offer terms that are attractive to their employees. Of course, workforces are free to unionise if they wish to do so, but imposing sectoral collective bargaining is reminiscent of the 1970s. I am not sure the Government would wish to go in that direction, but I note the comments of the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) in that regard.

I hope I have addressed the points that have been raised. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian once again, not just on securing this debate, but on his representations on ending the exemption in relation to offshore windfarm working. They have been not only listened to but acted upon.

Question put and agreed to.

Net Zero: 2050 Target

4.29 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on reaching Net Zero by 2050.

It is always good to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. This is the second time in about seven years that I have been able to introduce a Back-Bench debate, so I am very grateful for the opportunity.

I am pleased to be able to say that the net zero agenda—the energy transition—enjoys wider support across the House than practically any other area of policy. Yes, there are sceptics on both sides of the House, but it is extraordinary how widely shared the ambitions for net zero and decarbonisation are. I am grateful to organisations in my constituency and to my constituents. I thank Talking Tree, whose climate emergency centre has promoted decarbonisation in my constituency, and my constituent Hettie Quirke, who has raised these issues with me in constituency surgeries and provided me with my inspiration, or certainly my motivation, for requesting the debate.

This is a matter of great interest to me personally. I was fortunate to be appointed Energy Minister, the post that my right hon. Friend the Minister now ably fills, in July 2019, only a few weeks after we as a Government had passed the net zero Bill and enshrined the 2050 net zero target in law. That target was not simply plucked out of thin air. It is based on a scientific assessment of what we need to do as a global community to keep average temperature increases on this planet below 1.5° compared with 1990.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that at the time when the net zero by 2050 target was agreed, so was the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities? That means that countries such as the UK that can go further and faster must do that, so we should be looking at something much closer to real zero as soon as possible after 2030, not net zero by 2050.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As the hon. Lady well knows, she and I have very different views on this. I think that the Government have to carry the population with them, and it was interesting to hear what the unions were saying about oil and gas earlier this week. I would like to be able to press a button and say that we can get to absolute zero by 2030, but I do not think that is possible given the technological constraints and the financial and fiscal pressures. I do not think it is attainable, which is why I am happy to push the target of net zero by 2050.

I want to talk about our ability to reach that target. The hon. Lady is right that we could and should always try to do more, but we are constrained not only by technology but by fiscal necessities and, I might add, by what is going on in the rest of the world. The UK represents only 1% of global GDP, but we are an example and a leader, and we have to be able persuade partners across the G7 and the G20 and particularly in the developing world. As she will appreciate, that is not always easy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the right hon. Gentleman for raising an important subject that we will all have to acknowledge and be involved with. It is clear that to achieve this ambitious goal, we will need more dedicated funding—I hate to say that, but it is the truth. The establishment of the net zero innovation portfolio is a good indication of the Government's priority, but does he agree that enhanced funding must follow, and must be distributed to all regions, including to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales through Barnett consequentials?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I commend the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because he knows better than anybody how important Northern Ireland is to the transition. There are some great hydrogen businesses there, in particular. As Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy I was privileged to visit Queen's University Belfast, a world-leading academic institution in its focus on new technologies—not only energy technologies but cyber-security technologies and others. I am pleased that he has contributed so ably to this debate, as he always does.

I want to set out a few areas in which we have had successes, and then point out others where we have perhaps found the terrain heavier going and where there have been greater challenges. As I look at British energy policy, I see that some things are going very well and others could be improved.

First, as was mentioned in the previous debate, the biggest success in the net-zero space since I have been in the House has been power generation, including electricity and the grid. Even as late as 2012, 40% of electricity, such as the lights and everything we see around us, was derived essentially from burning coal, using a 19th century technology. Today, that figure is 1.5%. Across 11 years, we have essentially taken coal off the generating grid, which is a huge achievement. Many of us in this room will remember how important coal has been to the political and economic debate in this country. As we were growing up, there was never a day when we did not read about coal strikes, or industry-related issues around coal.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I warn other Members that I will have to make progress, but I am happy to take this intervention.

Richard Foord: I am very grateful to the right hon. Member. On the point about comparing today with 2012, the UK's draughty houses make up 14% of the UK's carbon emissions. In 2012, we were insulating 2.3 million houses every year, whereas now we are insulating fewer than 100,000. Does the right hon. Member accept that the Government would have saved taxpayers millions of pounds on the energy price guarantee if they had only kept insulating homes at the rate they were in 2015?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Of course, that would have been at great cost, and it would have been brought forward. I do not know what the effect of Putin's invasion of Ukraine or the sudden spike in gas prices at the end of 2021 would have been in that instance. The hon. Gentleman is right to notice that. If he permits me—I know Members

are always enthusiastic to jump in—the insulation of homes and the decarbonisation of domestic heating are issues I will address squarely later in my speech.

Decarbonising power generation has been a relative success. Offshore wind installation has been hugely successful. The target of 50 GW by 2030 is hugely ambitious. The fact that we have already installed 13 GW or thereabouts is hugely significant. No other country, apart from China, has our capacity in offshore wind. As the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord) observed, there are areas where we could do a lot better.

It has been very difficult to land a scheme than can effectively decarbonise domestic heating. Some 90% of the roughly 30 million homes in the United Kingdom rely on burning fossil fuels for heating: broadly 85% gas, and 5% oil. For that reason, it was always obvious to me that one of the quickest and easiest ways we can decarbonise domestic heating is through research and driving hydrogen. Hydrogen can be a substitute for natural gas. We obviously need to do that in a safe way—*[Interruption.]* I will give way one more time, but I need to finish the speech.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Will he also touch on nuclear? That is an area where we have not made as much progress over recent years as we could or should have done. It is effectively carbon efficient, as well.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend will remember my three years as a Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I was always a passionate advocate for nuclear, because one of the first things I was made aware of was that we need a balanced power generation system with lots of different technologies. In energy, there is no silver bullet, as I am sure my hon. Friend appreciates. We have to rely on a range of technologies in order to provide resilience to the system. Three metrics of any energy system are the “SAS” of security, affordability and sustainability. Those are the three watchwords I recall when I consider this important subject.

As far as I am concerned, and certainly as far as the Government are concerned, unless they have changed their policy in the past few months—this was the case when I was in government—nuclear has to be part of the answer. There is a debate to be had as to what sort of nuclear we need, be it small modular reactors or the large-scale approach. Our view until recently has been that we need a mix of both. I believe that is still the Government’s position, but the Minister can answer on that.

I wish to touch broadly on a couple of areas where, supportive as I am of the Government, they need to be wary and deliberate in their approach. Taxes have been increased, with the windfall taxes and the electricity generator levy, or whatever one wants to call them. I fully understand the political need for them, but we should not be discouraging investment in key technologies. The Government should examine the capital allowance regime and ensure there is more incentive to invest in decarbonisation technologies, not less.

One issue that has bedevilled our power generation system is the grid. I cannot see any colleagues from Norfolk and the east coast, but one issue that they have relates to the connectors, the landing stations and the

substations for electricity generated by offshore wind in the North sea. We need to see how we can more intelligently and efficiently create an offshore network that can land this electricity in one point. I would like more Government engagement on that; it has been considerable but the point is important.

I realise that I am running out of time, because others wish to take part in the debate, but I wish to mention buildings, which were touched on by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton. This has been the most difficult nut to crack in the whole decarbonisation space, as we see when we look at various other sectors. I have mentioned the power generation sector, where we have decreased considerably our dependence on fossil fuels, gas burning and coal burning. In the transport sector, electric vehicles have really taken off in the UK. We need more take-up of them, but the transport sector is an area where there has been success. I saw my first EV in Israel 10 years ago, in 2013, at a time when we had zero EVs. As late as 2016 we had very few, and there has now been quite an impressive take-up. If we go down that route, we can imagine a world where we have decarbonised transport to a considerable extent. However, this area of domestic heating and how we decarbonise our housing stock has proved the most challenging.

There are two issues with our domestic housing stock. First, the buildings themselves are not very energy-efficient; we have the oldest housing stock in Europe. Secondly, as I have said, 90% of those houses are rely on the burning of fossil fuels. So there are two criteria on which we are not doing very well. First, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton said, we have to make sure that we can retrofit and improve the housing stock. Secondly, we have to be smart about how we heat those homes once they have been improved and what the power sources will be. As I have said, there is a big challenge there.

Given the huge reliance on natural gas in our system domestically, hydrogen has to be part of the answer, as we see when we look at where the Germans are. They have a huge dependence on natural gas for industrial purposes, and Putin’s invasion of Ukraine set the cat among the pigeons. German Ministers, including Energy Ministers, and other politicians are focused on how to substitute other forms of power for the gas they imported from Russia. They have ruled out nuclear power and focused on liquefied natural gas and, particularly, on hydrogen, which is a source of energy that the Government could look at again in order to accelerate its deployment.

Briefly, I want to mention what the United States is doing. Since I started at BEIS, one of the biggest changes has been the introduction of the US Inflation Reduction Act. Industrial players in the sector say there is a huge pull to the United States because of the subsidies and support it is giving to green technologies, in a naked and unembarrassed way. As energy Minister, Secretary of State for BEIS and, briefly, Chancellor, I was very keen that we had something to say on this, because it is not just a huge challenge to us but to the European industrial base. Having been in his position, I know that the Minister will not be able to talk about Treasury affairs, but I would be interested to hear the Department’s thinking on the US IRA development.

This is an introductory debate about a subject I am very passionate about, as are many Members here, but finally I want to thank the House and the many varied

[Kwasi Kwarteng]

organisations that have sent me great notes and briefings, which show me that this is one of the most important issues any Government will face in the next 20 or 30 years. I have brought this debate, other MPs will secure further debates before the end of this Parliament, and I am convinced we will revisit the subject in the next Parliament. Many issues that we debate are of largely ephemeral interest, but this matter will affect our children and generations to come, so I am honoured to be able to introduce this short debate today. It is not the first, but one of the very many debates we will have, and should have, about this crucial issue.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Before I call Barry Gardiner, I remind hon. Members that we have the wind-up speeches at 5.10 pm at the latest, so each contribution should be a maximum of five minutes.

4.47 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Sir Christopher, under your guidance, I will try to speak swiftly. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on introducing the debate; I welcome much that he said. We are debating the Government policy on reaching net zero by 2050, but perhaps it would be more appropriate to think about the Government's barriers to reaching net zero by 2050, because the truth is that we are not on a path to net zero.

Not all is bad. Under the Climate Change Act 2008 and the Environment Act 2021, the UK created a strong legal framework for achieving net zero emissions by 2050. We, on both sides of the House, should be proud of that. However, legal promises alone cannot stand. They must be accompanied by consequential and transformational political action. The question is not what we have committed ourselves to, but how we are implementing the steps that are required to get there.

The Government know that. The 2021 net zero strategy clearly outlines the fact that achieving net zero "will require the transformation of every sector of the global economy."

In the 2023 environmental principles policy statement, the Government commit themselves to

"a system that places environmental considerations at the heart of policymaking across government."

Again, I welcome the language, but the net zero growth plan does not follow that vision. Instead, it sets out a vision for a market led and technology driven net zero transition. A technology centred, market led approach is Government-speak for a voluntarist business-as-usual approach. This is too important to get wrong.

Rooting our net zero approach in technological developments blinkers us to the essential unity of the twin crises of climate and the environment and ignores the very nature-based solutions that the UK Government have rightly championed internationally. It shows a fundamental incoherence in the Government's philosophical approach. We will neither achieve our environmental goals nor reap the benefits of the economic opportunities of the 21st century if we leave it to the market to lead. The Climate Change Committee has pointed out that while currently more than 31,000 people across the UK are employed in offshore wind alone, that is set to rise to 97,000 by 2030. This is a huge opportunity.

I welcome some of the investment that the Government have committed to achieving net zero, with £30 billion of public investment for a green industrial revolution, £36 billion of funding for improvements in energy efficiency, £20 billion for carbon capture and storage and a billion for low-carbon technologies. The Government appear to remain perfectly convinced that their approach will catalyse around—they say—£100 billion of private investment in developing those new industries and new carbon technologies, such as offshore wind and carbon capture and storage. That is a combined total of £187 billion.

By contrast, the Climate Change Committee has made it clear that we need between £300 billion and £430 billion of investment to achieve our goals. More importantly, it is clear that a strategic programme is required to reform the regulatory frameworks and to remove those barriers to the planning and construction of renewable energy infrastructure. It is not just about money; it is about the whole regulatory framework. The 2022 Climate Change Committee report points out that that has not been done; there is no adequate policy framework for catalysing the large-scale transformations necessary to achieve the established net zero targets by 2050. It is concerned that there does not seem to be any urgency on the part of the Government to do so.

I welcome the independent review conducted by the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore). He recognised the barriers that remain in place. His review said that the Government should take immediate action, and it recommended 25 short-term policies that the Government should achieve by 2025. The review called those policies "25 by 2025". The idea was both to remove barriers that prevented business and industries from supporting the net zero ambition and to provide an immediate signal of intent to the private sector that the Government were serious about delivering their net zero target.

We were disappointed on the Environmental Audit Committee when the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps), responded to questions in our most recent hearing. When asked about wood pellet biomass at the Drax power station—a technology that emits 18% more carbon than coal, yet still remains a critical part of the Government's net zero agenda—the Secretary of State said that he hoped he might be able to say more in a future session. Well, we all hope that, because we have been eagerly awaiting the Government's biomass strategy, which was due to be published last year and has still not made it into the public domain. His response on hydrogen, supposedly a key part in the Government's plan, was equally disappointing. The Secretary of State—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. We have limited time and the hon. Gentleman has now gone over his time limit. I call Virginia Crosbie.

4.53 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for calling this important debate. A McKinsey report has stated that the global net zero transition could be worth a trillion pounds to the UK and support just under half a million UK jobs

by 2030. It has been described as the economic opportunity of the 21st century. It is recognised that the fastest and most reliable way for the UK to achieve net zero and energy security is to pursue a programme of new nuclear build.

I entered the House in 2019 to represent the constituents of Ynys Môn. They have lived with nuclear power at Wylfa since the 1960s. I stood on a mandate to do everything I could to bring new nuclear to Wylfa. The majority of my constituents support nuclear. They know it is clean, they know it is safe and they know it brings jobs. But Wylfa is being decommissioned, as other nuclear plants have been across the UK. Despite 30 years of promises and the good will of local people, it has yet to be replaced.

Anglesey is known as “energy island”. We have wind, wave, solar, tidal and hydrogen—and, hopefully, new nuclear if I have anything to do with it. Geographically, Wylfa is probably the best new nuclear site in the UK, if not Europe. My constituents in the surrounding area, including Cemlyn, Tregele, Cemaes and Amlwch, and right across Anglesey, desperately need the employment it would offer and give the site that all-important social licence.

I have seen many steps on the way to new nuclear at Wylfa: the British energy security strategy, which specifically mentions Wylfa; the launch of the £120 million future nuclear enabling fund at Wylfa by my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), who is sitting beside me; and the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill. However, we have yet to see the spades in the ground that the people of Ynys Môn and the UK need.

Building nuclear plants takes years. Just going through development consent takes years. In the building of Hinkley C and Sizewell C, we are developing a new generation of nuclear skills that we will lose if there is nothing for them to move on to. We need a plan for how and when we will roll out the Government’s goal of a one gigawatt nuclear reactor going to financial investment decision in this Parliament and two going to financial investment decisions in the next Parliament. We currently produce 3.9 GW of energy from nuclear. That is forecast to decline to 3.2 GW by 2030, with all but one of our nuclear power stations going off line in the next decade.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on small nuclear reactors, I welcome the SMR competition announced by the Chancellor in the spring Budget. I am looking forward to the launch of Great British Nuclear and it is brilliant news that for the first time we have a nuclear Minister. Other countries are taking bold and ambitious steps on investment and action in the move to net zero. Without a similar response, we risk losing out on new opportunities and potential economic gains. We have shown that as a Government we can move at speed when we face a crisis. In the Minister’s summing up, I want to hear—given that we are just 27 years away from 2050, we are in a crisis—the Government’s plan to grasp the opportunity and to build new nuclear at Wylfa. *Diolch yn fawr.*

4.57 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I welcome this debate on Government policy on reaching net zero by 2050 and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on securing it.

I would like to start by setting out the context for the debate. Ministers are very fond of pointing out that the UK’s emissions have almost halved since 1990. However, when we are, in the words of the UN Secretary General, “on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator,”

relying on past progress is not enough. Secondly, that figure ignores emissions from imports, focusing only on emissions from the things we produce domestically. Frankly, if we outsource most of our manufacturing, it is not surprising that our emissions go down. We have just outsourced them to countries like China. But we cannot outsource that responsibility and we must not. If we take a consumption-based approach, the UK has only actually reduced its emissions by 23% since 1990. That is equivalent to an average cumulative reduction of just 0.7% a year. That is hardly transformational.

In the short time I have, I want to focus on what is at the heart of the climate crisis, which is our seemingly insatiable addiction to fossil fuels. Frankly, it does not matter how many good things we do or how many renewables we bring on line if, at the same time, we continue to pump yet more filthy oil and gas, and continue to license more oil and gas fields, as the Government plan to do. Let me just make three quick points.

First, new oil and gas will not bring down bills. The right hon. Member for Spelthorne himself noted in February last year:

“The situation we are facing is a price issue, not a security of supply issue...Additional UK production won’t materially affect the wholesale market price.”

Well, I could not agree with him more. He gets to the nub of the issue: we have an energy affordability crisis, not an energy supply crisis. Fossil fuels are not only heating our shared and only home, but are so expensive that they have plunged millions of UK households into fuel poverty, all while oil and gas companies have raked in obscene, record-breaking profits. Our dependence on oil and gas is the very reason for high energy bills. It is somewhat perverse, therefore, that anyone would suggest that they can also be the solution.

We know by now that the way to bring down energy bills is to unleash truly abundant renewables, alongside storage and batteries, and to properly insulate homes to keep them warm over the winter months. It really is not that complicated. It should shock us all that energy bills are now a staggering £9.8 billion higher than they would have been had Government Ministers not “cut the green crap” a decade ago.

Secondly, new licences will not improve energy security, contrary to Ministers’ claims, because it is not our oil and gas—it is owned by private companies, who sell it on global markets to the highest bidder. In fact, the UK’s gas exports increased following Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine in response to high European demand. Even if it did belong to us, the majority of fossil fuel projects in the pipeline are for oil, not gas, and we already export around 80% of the oil that we extract because it is not the type used in UK refineries.

That is before we even talk about the fact that despite disingenuous protestations, no one is talking about turning off the taps tomorrow. We are saying that there should be no new licences for projects, which would not come online for many years to come. I refer the right hon. Member for Spelthorne to Lord Deben, the chair

[Caroline Lucas]

of the CCC, who has said how much he supports the policy position of no new licensing of oil and gas. He is a prominent member of the right hon. Member's own party.

Finally, let us put to bed the idea that, somehow, producing oil and gas domestically is better for our planet. It is commonly asserted that the oil and gas extracted from the North sea than has lower emissions than imports. Although that is certainly the case for liquefied natural gas, imports of which have undoubtedly increased in the last year, it is not the case for Norwegian oil and gas, where the majority of our imports typically come from. In fact, the UK's production is two-and-a-half times more polluting than Norway's because the UK uses practices such as flaring and venting, which have been banned in Norway since the 1970s.

Furthermore, the Government maintain that new extraction is entirely in line with delivering net zero, but that is only because they have washed their hands of emissions produced when the oil and gas are burned—otherwise known as scope 3 emissions. Surely those have to be taken into account if we are truly to understand the impact of fossil fuels produced in the UK. The Climate Change Committee has been clear that extra oil and gas extracted in the UK will

“support a larger...market overall.”

When the International Energy Agency and so many other experts say loudly and clearly that it is simply not compatible with our climate change objectives to be pursuing new oil and gas, we simply should not do it.

5.2 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a privilege to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. Many thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng)—it is a pleasure to be back discussing floating offshore wind with him. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the Celtic sea, both he and the Minister have spoken to me at length on this issue.

I fully support the UK Government's commitment to ensuring that floating offshore wind makes up 5 GW of energy by 2030, but everyone will recall that the Celtic wind blows the other way to the wind in the North sea, which is why it is vital that this project goes ahead. The recent administrative strike price in the allocation round for contracts for difference did not, unfortunately, take into account the unprecedented global economic pressures that have led to costs rising by 20%.

An already challenging picture in the Celtic sea has been exacerbated by delays in leasing rounds for projects by the Crown Estate, as well as the lengthy amount of time that key strategic ports have had to wait for the Government to announce the much welcomed floating offshore wind manufacturing investment scheme, which is essential to the funding to deliver port infrastructure. I fear that, at this pace, we will miss the opportunities of flow in the Celtic sea by 2030, and potentially deter much needed international investment into the Celtic sea.

I agree with my right hon. Friend on buildings, but I have a particular concern as a very rural MP. Some decisions around rurality and how we change our housing need to be looked at differently. That is why I supported

the ten-minute rule Bill of my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) on hydrotreated vegetable oil as an alternative for oil fired, which is used in 25% of off-grid properties.

I would like to come to biomass. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the wood panel industry, which is not the stuff on the walls but basically kitchens and the like. I thank the Minister for his engagement on this matter. In my mind, burning wood for energy is a short-sighted and environmentally damaging endeavour. Wood is too valuable a resource to simply burn, given it is the best way to sequester carbon and avoids the use of environmentally damaging materials in the economy. Wood-dependent industries are struggling to get the wood supply they need. Addressing that should be a focus of policymakers. We need to change direction.

We cannot rely on bioenergy with carbon capture and storage for energy security under net zero scenarios. We are fooling ourselves if we think that we can. Proponents argue that BECCS will help to contribute to energy security, but that is inaccurate. BECCS comes with an energy penalty, as it requires energy to power the CCS unit and to provide power to the grid. Because of that, BECCS can either maximise power generation or CO₂ capture. It cannot do both. Given that it was previously reported by the *Financial Times* that the regulator had appointed a Drax consultant, Black and Veatch, to carry out an assurance audit into the company, I hope that the formal investigation recently announced by Ofgem will be carried out independently, thoroughly and transparently. It should not be a desk-based inquiry, as has been the case before. As we look to these new technologies, it is vital that they really are sustainable and that we are on the right road towards net zero.

We have not touched much on transport. As an active travel champion, I am concerned that tomorrow's National Audit Office report will again show that we are not meeting the goals to achieve our active travel measures and that we need to do more to decarbonise every different element of our society. The transition to net zero is a multifaceted mission that needs a robust and well-calculated response, with each part fully calculating its energy contribution and all its carbon costs, including transportation. Those need to be properly analysed along with their financial contributions in generating the energy that we fundamentally rely on. The new Exeter University EC simulator, which I visited last week, may well be a step towards independent analysis of different projects as we continue the challenging but vital work of moving towards net zero.

5.6 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I admire the chutzpah of the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) in bringing forward the debate. Not only did he make questionable decisions as Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with regard to Scotland's net zero ambitions, but he was then responsible—along with the previous Prime Minister—for crashing the economy and making net zero far more expensive for this Government, as well as everyone else, due to the soaring cost of borrowing for capital investment.

The right hon. Member spoke about nuclear energy; we really need to move away from the nuclear obsession. Hinkley will now cost £33 billion and it is years late. Sizewell C, which will invariably cost upwards of £40 billion, is located on a site subject to coastal erosion and climate change sea rises. SMRs are not the answer, either. There is no approved design, they have an estimated cost of £2 billion each and Rolls-Royce is hoping for an initial order of up to 15. That is £30 billion of commitment better spent on energy-efficiency measures, storage and the electrification of heating. Nuclear is also inflexible and not a good accompaniment for intermittent renewables. Yet further investment in storage is therefore required.

The right hon. Member described pumped-storage hydro as a Scottish technology. The First Minister recently wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to agree a cap and floor mechanism that will get Coire Glas, the Cruachan extension and other pumped-storage hydro schemes up and running. They cost a fraction of what nuclear does and need only the revenue mechanism to release private capital investment.

Contracts for difference have been a success in delivering the deployment of renewables. However, in the Tories' typical penny-wise, pound-foolish attitude, their lowest cost obsession has seen a major failure to develop UK supply chains properly. It is Tory procurement processes that have prevented Scotland from properly becoming the Saudi Arabia of wind. It is crystal-clear that a coherent industrial strategy is required. That said, I am pretty sure that we had one, and we all know what happened to it lately. The failure to invest—[*Interruption.*]

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Does the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) seek to intervene?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would be happy to do so.

Gavin Newlands: I would be delighted to give way.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Of course, the hon. Member is quite right that I, with the then Chancellor, suppressed the industrial strategy, but what we have done—[*Interruption.*] Thank you very much—I thought we had stringent rules about phones and calls and that sort of thing, but it seems to me that every time I speak, someone has got their phone on.

Anyway, we have got an innovation strategy and an energy security strategy. We have tons and tons of strategy, and that more than fills the gap of what was a woolly and ill-defined industrial strategy.

Gavin Newlands: I thank the former Secretary of State and Chancellor for his intervention, but I profoundly disagree with his take on this. I will go on to talk about this at the end of my speech, but the strategies he mentions do not have much in them. If we look under the bonnet, there is nothing there. For him to say that those strategies more than make up for the loss of the industrial strategy is for the birds, to be quite honest.

The failure to invest in upgrading the transmission system between England and Scotland has resulted in nearly £5 billion-worth of constraint payments—money that could and should have been invested in grid upgrades. Developers in Scottish waters are now having to connect to the grid in the north-east of England, bypassing

Scotland altogether. That said, it is one way to avoid the utterly ridiculous and outrageous additional grid charges that penalise developers in Scotland. The right hon. Member was also in post for the further betrayal of Acorn CCS, which is the most advanced project and the one with most delivery certainty, but it is still waiting for Government support. That belies the Tory commitment to net zero.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) and I have visited several businesses and projects in the highlands, Orkney and Aberdeen that are hugely important to reaching our net zero targets. Storegga, of the Acorn Scottish cluster, was one, and another was the hugely impressive European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney—the real energy island in the UK.

Not content with providing innovators the platform with which to test tidal energy, EMEC has come up with solutions to add value to the energy produced, including an electrolyser complemented by storage batteries producing green hydrogen, which in turn is to power other projects such as a combined heat and power unit at Kirkwall airport and a hydrogen fuel cell at Kirkwall harbour to provide clean shore power to ships tied up there. I say “is to”, because delivery of the hydrogen is an issue. Apparently, due to Maritime and Coastguard Agency regulations, the hydrogen can only be delivered if there is no freight and fewer than 25 passengers on the ferry. Those regulations seriously curtail EMEC's good efforts.

Come to think of it, where is the Government's coherent strategy on delivering hydrogen, full stop? They talk hydrogen up often enough, but those who are producing it struggle to deliver it. You could not make it up, Sir Christopher. It is obvious that tidal stream needs a bigger ringfence than it currently has. As is often the case, we lead on innovation, research and development in this country but, just at the point where a new sector needs public sector investment to ensure that we retain that lead and the supply chain benefits that flow from it, the UK once again prevaricates and allows someone else to reap the economic benefits.

To conclude, there is a big risk that allocation round 5 will be a complete failure, like last year's Spanish auction, with strike rates now too low due to inflation and rising costs, as mentioned previously. Again, the Government—more specifically, the Treasury—are tone-deaf, as they are in their attitude to the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, which is causing investors to rebalance their portfolios across the Atlantic. The Government are now taking credit for work undertaken by the Scottish Government; whether it is tree planting or zero-emission buses, they have subsumed the Scottish targets into UK targets to hide their own failures. No doubt active travel will be next.

The Tories' record on net zero is a litany of failure; when we look under the bonnet, there is no mechanism nor the required investment for delivery. Scotland is doing so much more, but with one arm tied behind its back. As in so many other areas, Westminster is holding Scotland back.

5.12 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher.

[Kerry McCarthy]

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on securing this debate. I am pleased to see that he is still pursuing an interest in net zero. I agree with some of what he said, but there were some points I would have liked him to cover. For example, when he talked about the grid, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) has just said, the biggest problem is not the question where the pylons go in east Anglia, but the lack of grid connectivity, which is a massive obstacle to economic growth. That is something we need to solve as we move towards greater use of electricity in our industrial sector.

Three former Business Secretaries, from the Lib Dems, Conservatives and Labour, have all come together today to bemoan the lack of an industrial strategy, so I do not agree with the right hon. Member for Spelthorne on that. He talked about retrofitting homes, which is obviously important, but it would help if we stopped building homes that do not meet energy performance certificate C standard. We are compounding the problem, having built more than 1 million homes since the zero carbon homes pledge was dropped that do not meet that standard.

The right hon. Member for Spelthorne mentioned green levies and incentives for decarbonisation. It would have been interesting to hear his thoughts on the hydrogen levy. We were in the Energy Bill Committee earlier today and it must be said that, based on Second Reading of that Bill, there is a lot of unhappiness on both sides of the House. We will oppose the hydrogen levy on bills, and I would welcome his support on that, because I do not think we should be putting the burden on consumers when it is mostly industry that will benefit.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Just to clarify, is Labour opposing the hydrogen levy on bills, or its removal?

Kerry McCarthy: The House of Lords voted against the hydrogen levy

on bills on the basis that it is a regressive measure and we should not be adding to the burden on consumers. We support that position; the Government think that it should go on bills, where it is the industry that benefits. There have been reports that the Secretary of State is due to U-turn on that position very soon, so the right hon. Member might want to be ahead of the curve and jump the right way before the Secretary of State does.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am sure that the Secretary of State does not need my encouragement, or otherwise, to come to the right decision.

Kerry McCarthy: I am sure that the right hon. Member would be a very persuasive voice.

The Government's commitment to a net zero target is to be welcomed, but a target for a date set far into the future—2050—is pretty meaningless unless it is backed up by a comprehensive road map as to how we are going to get there. We know that the majority of that journey needs to be done in the very early years, with just the hard-to-decarbonise sectors following at the end, so we need to know how much ground we are going to cover and when. The Government were taken to court on this issue last year, with the High Court ruling that they had provided insufficient detail. There

was a big hype about “green day” at the end of March; eventually, the Government decided that it was not quite green enough and changed its name to something else, but what we got was a plan that—even in terms of our 2030 nationally determined contribution—only sets out how we would deliver 92% of that. We are still way off track.

Net zero is not a slogan or a mere box-ticking exercise: it is a whole paradigm shift that we must instigate, as a country and as a global community. Scientists are warning that we are likely to breach the 1.5° threshold in the next four years. We are running out of time, and we need to do everything as fast as we can. There has been a lot of negativity in recent days about net zero, with people pushing back against Labour's announcement that we would not support any new oil and gas licences. Again, people have been repeating that old trope that it is too expensive to reach net zero, when we know that renewables are far cheaper now.

The Government do not seem to grasp that this is a huge challenge for the country, but as has been said, it is also an enormous opportunity. The right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who authored the recent net zero review, said that it is

“the economic opportunity of the decade—if not the century”

to create a new economy. As the right hon. Member for Spelthorne mentioned, President Biden has not only recognised that opportunity, but seized it with the Inflation Reduction Act, and the EU has responded with its green deal industrial plan. The Chancellor has said that he will come up with a response in the autumn, which is at least better than the response from the Energy Secretary, who tells us that the UK is already decades ahead of the USA. The Minister has said that the rest of the world is “playing catch-up” with us. We do have 22% of the world's offshore wind installations, as I suspect the Minister will tell us, but we have only 2% of global wind industry jobs—that is just one example. A country such as Denmark, which recognises the export opportunities, has over eight times as many jobs as the UK for the equivalent wind energy capacity.

Businesses I meet now are describing the Inflation Reduction Act as a game changer, and are warning that they will transfer investments to the US. There have been occasional success stories—the news that Jaguar Land Rover is set to establish a gigafactory in the south-west, in Bridgwater, is very welcome—but that comes with a sense of relief that that company has made that announcement, rather than real confidence that there is a coherent industrial strategy that will deliver the 10 gigafactories that the Faraday Institution predicts we need. I would dispute the Minister's suggestion that we are decades ahead: we need to have a coherent industrial strategy, a response to the Inflation Reduction Act sooner rather than later, and a revised net zero strategy that shows that we really are on course to meet that goal.

5.19 pm

The Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero (Graham Stuart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to listen to this excellent and important debate. I begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on securing it. Of course, I come to this

debate with some trepidation, as I am facing someone who did my job previously and then, unlike me—yet, anyway—went on to be Secretary of State at what was then the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. He made immense progress on our path to net zero and energy security

I would not normally be rude, but I hope that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) can perhaps move on, as we debate more often, from a rather adolescent approach to one that more genuinely engages with the substance. His was not a particularly brilliant contribution to this debate in comparison with those made by other Members, which I thought actually had some substance.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne oversaw the publication of the landmark, world-leading net zero strategy. The independent Climate Change Committee described it as

“an ambitious and comprehensive strategy that marks a significant step forward for UK climate policy”

and as

“the world’s most comprehensive plan to reach net zero”.

It is worth highlighting a couple of points. When we came to power in 2010, just 7% of this country’s electricity came from renewables; now it is well over 40%. The issue of insulation and the number of houses being insulated was also raised. I do not know why the Liberal Democrat member who raised it, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Richard Foord), is no longer here for the winding-up speeches, but anyway—he raised it before leaving the Chamber. It is worth noting that in 2010 the figure was just 14% and by the end of this year I expect that 50% of homes will have reached energy performance certificate level C or above, which is a huge—indeed, transformative—change, albeit one that needs to go much further and faster.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne oversaw COP26, which was the biggest summit that this country has ever hosted. It brought together 120 world leaders and over 38,000 key figures from Governments, civil society, businesses, youth and more, in order to tackle the urgent challenge of climate change. It is also worth noting that we have met all our carbon budgets to date and that we are the first major economy to legislate for net zero—done under this Government. So this country is more on track than almost any other country and certainly more than any major economy on earth. That is the context that people could be forgiven for not realising was in fact the case from the rather adolescent contribution of the Scottish National party spokesman. I will leave to one side any comments that the chairman of the Climate Change Committee has made about the Scottish Government’s performance in meeting their climate targets, because doing otherwise would be to descend to the level that the SNP spokesman stayed at throughout his speech.

Barry Gardiner: When the Minister says that this country is “more on track”, does that mean that we are “on track” or that we are just closer to being “on track” than anybody else?

Graham Stuart: That is an excellent question—we have exceeded every carbon budget to date. We not only have the net zero strategy but we had the net zero plan on 30 March, setting out how we will do it. Of course

that stretches through to 2037. Not every aspect of the way in which we will fulfil that aim has been set out to date—people would not expect them to be 14 years before that date—but we are on track. What we have to do is make sure we stay on track. I would not try to represent to the House today anything other than the fact that it is an extremely challenging business to ensure that we continue on track. That is what we are working on flat-out.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne oversaw the publication of the British energy security strategy, which raised greatly the ambition set out in the net zero strategy, and since those documents came out the Government have continued to progress. In March, we published the Powering Up Britain package, which demonstrates that we are on track to reach net zero, and in the net zero growth plan we are bolstering delivery. That plan responds to the expert recommendations made in Mission Zero, the independent review of net zero, to which there has been reference in the debate, which explored how we can achieve net zero in the most pro-growth, pro-business way.

Our net zero ambition needs strong public and private partnership, and we are forging these links in a number of ways. Government policy and funding commitments are already leading to real outcomes, and we are leading the world in so many ways, not just on offshore wind.

The Government are committed to accelerating renewable electricity deployment. The Powering Up Britain package sets out our delivery plans for meeting those ambitions. It includes important announcements on a range of technologies, including up to £160 million of new funding to kick-start our investment in port infrastructure to deliver on our floating offshore wind ambitions, which were referred to earlier, and a new solar taskforce to drive deployment of that important technology as we seek to increase that fivefold by 2035. We launched the taskforce on 25 May, getting key players from Government, industry, regulatory organisations and other relevant organisations round the table to drive forward the actions required to deliver that ambition of deploying 70 GW of domestic and industrial rooftop and ground-mounted solar by 2035, all while cutting installation costs, boosting British skills and jobs, and improving grid access to support a solar power revolution.

Barry Gardiner: The Minister rightly refers to the need to improve our electricity supply from solar. Has he looked at the interconnection that is proposed from Morocco to come in at the Hinkley juncture? Are he and the Department now considering a contract for difference, which would enable that contract to go ahead?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We are looking at the Xlinks project. We have set up a team to look at it with no further commitment other than to make an assessment. It will be reporting to me shortly on that. We will look at the outline business case going forward. We are looking at it; I do not want to go further—positively or negatively—than saying that.

Gavin Newlands: I realise it is a stretch for the Minister to try to portray himself as the adult in the room with his contribution, but he mentioned good access. Will he therefore tell us what will happen with the grid constraints

[Gavin Newlands]

across the border, even in Orkney where all the energy it produces cannot actually be fed into the grid? When will that be resolved?

Graham Stuart: I thank the hon. Member for that question. It is a good question because the grid constraints, transmission and local connection are the biggest barriers standing in the way of decarbonising our electricity system by 2035. That is why the networks commissioner was asked to investigate that and will be reporting to us this month. That is why the Prime Minister appointed for the first time a Minister for Nuclear and Networks, my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), who is working on that. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North is absolutely right to point out that the transformation we have seen in renewables, the change in our generation system and the requirement to grow our electricity capacity going forward puts enormous strain on that and creates not only supply chain, financing and deployment challenges in that space, but political ones because of the infrastructure impact on communities. A lot of work is going on in that space, and I am working closely with Scottish Government colleagues and other colleagues to try to ensure that we work in the most coherent manner possible.

We have heard mention in the debate of the need to improve the energy performance of homes across the country. Notwithstanding the transformation we have brought about—it is not enough—that is why we have established a new energy efficiency taskforce to drive forward improvements. That is why we are spending £12.6 billion over this Parliament and up to 2028 to

support and provide long-term funding and certainty, supporting the growth of supply chains and ensuring that we can scale up delivery over time. Only yesterday I visited Octopus Energy's centre, looking at how that company is trying to design heat pumps to be cheaper to install and more efficient, so they can drive the cost down and speed up the time it takes to install them, thus making the decarbonisation of heat in homes, which is a thorny and challenging subject, more realistic and deliverable.

The delivery of net zero relies on strong business action. That is why we brought together senior business and finance leaders into a new strategic net zero council co-chaired, alongside myself, by Co-op Group CEO Shirine Khoury-Haq. It includes Carl Ennis, CEO of Siemens; Ian Stuart, UK CEO of HSBC; Chris Hulatt, the co-founder of Octopus Investments, and others from UK business. The full membership reflects the cross-cutting nature of our net zero challenge. The next meeting is planned to be held in No. 10. We are mapping all the various business and sectoral organisations focused on net zero, looking to ensure that we have the most coherent architecture and that we can develop road maps for each sector, so that we can take the cross-cutting nature of Government in other policies and put it into something that people in particular sectors can more easily adjust to and adapt and that investors can invest in. The green jobs delivery group was formed after the publication of the net zero strategy and followed work by my right hon. Friend—

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 6 June 2023

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Unleashing Rural Opportunity

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Growing the economy is one of our Government's five priorities. Growing the rural economy is key to that, and to continuing to make our countryside a vibrant and thriving place where people want to live and work. The countryside is rich in human and natural potential, with strong communities and entrepreneurial businesses. Recent experience during the pandemic has shown beyond doubt that rural communities and businesses are adaptable, resilient, and full of energy and drive. We recognise, though, that rural communities can face challenges, including those connected with sparsity and distance from key facilities. We want to go further in unleashing the inherent potential that exists and supporting people living and working in the countryside to have a prosperous, sustainable future.

That is why we are launching "Unleashing Rural Opportunity", in which we set out four broad priorities that are key to rural communities being able to thrive; set out new initiatives; and consider what we are already delivering to make this happen. The Prime Minister also chaired a discussion on delivering for rural areas at Cabinet this morning.

Connectivity: We will continue to deliver gigabit broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas and increase access to public transport. New measures announced today include providing £7 million to test new ways of bringing together satellite, wireless and fixed line internet connectivity in remote areas across the UK. This will help support farmers and tourism businesses in those areas to access lightning-fast, reliable connectivity for the first time, and will help rural businesses in trial areas to make the most of new technologies. We are also today announcing the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) as our rural connectivity champion, to drive innovation and investment in advanced wireless technologies in rural areas across the UK.

Growing the rural economy: We will support rural areas so they can prosper, in line with the Prime Minister's key priorities for the country as a whole. Today we are announcing new measures to help them do so, including consulting on changes to permitted development rights to support rural diversification. This will look at whether there should be changes to the current rules in England, cutting red tape to make the planning process more straightforward for farmers so they can more easily improve their redundant agricultural buildings, helping to make their businesses more productive.

Homes and energy: We will facilitate the building of more homes for local people to buy where local communities want them and we will provide secure and resilient energy supplies. New measures announced today for England include funding of £2.5 million for a network of rural housing enablers to boost the supply of new,

affordable housing by identifying development opportunities, supporting site owners and community representatives to navigate the planning system, and engaging with local communities to help shape developments. We are also providing local authorities with new powers to manage the impact of holiday lets on local communities—recognising their contribution to the tourism sector—and we will consult on making it easier for farmers to change their redundant agricultural buildings into family homes.

Communities: We want rural communities to continue to be places where people want to enjoy living. We will improve access to high-quality health care and take further action to tackle rural crime. New measures include the imminent publication of a dental plan for England that will help improve provision in rural areas. We will also put in place legislation this summer to increase fly-tipping and litter penalties, and intend to ringfence those penalties to tackle this blight on the countryside. We are also supporting the National Police Chiefs' Council to establish a new National Rural Crime Unit to support police forces across Great Britain in their response to rural crimes. In addition to additional funding from the Home Office, DEFRA will fund a post within the National Rural Crime Unit to tackle fly-tipping across Great Britain.

"Unleashing Rural Opportunity" complements our annual rural report, to be published later this year. It will be published on gov.uk today and a copy will be laid in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS825]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Electronic Travel Authorisation

The Minister for Immigration (Robert Jenrick): The Government's No. 1 priority is keeping the UK safe. In order to further strengthen our border security, the Government are launching an electronic travel authorisation (ETA) scheme in October 2023.

The ETA scheme will be implemented in a phased manner, on a nationality basis, by the end of 2024. Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia will be the first countries to benefit from the ETA scheme. The Home Office will provide further details about which country will be next to benefit from the ETA scheme in due course.

However, today I am announcing that the Home Office intends to charge £10 for an ETA application during the initial roll-out period. This fee level is competitive with that of equivalent systems run by other countries, and will ensure that the Department's costs in delivering the scheme are effectively covered across a range of volume scenarios.

In order to support the charging of this initial £10 fee, I am today laying an amendment to the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Order 2016 to introduce the necessary enabling provisions, including a maximum chargeable fee. I will then lay regulations before Parliament in the autumn to amend the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations 2018 so that the initial fee of £10 will be established from October 2023.

The Home Office will review the fee charged for ETA applications in advance of further roll-out of the scheme across 2024, including to the EU and other non-visa national countries. Details on any further planned updates to the fee level following the initial roll-out period will be communicated in due course.

[HCWS821]

Chinese “Overseas Police Service Stations”

The Minister for Security (Tom Tugendhat): Last November, I committed to update the House on the response to media reporting of unofficial Chinese “police service stations.” The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire reiterated this commitment in April.

Reports by the non-governmental organisation Safeguard Defenders claimed that there were three Chinese “police service stations” in the UK—in Croydon, Glasgow and Hendon. Further allegations have been made about an additional site in Belfast.

These reports alleged that, while these “police service stations” are officially set up in countries across the world to conduct administrative tasks to support Chinese nationals residing abroad, they are also used to monitor and harass diaspora communities and, in some cases, to coerce people to return to China outside of legitimate channels.

The police have visited each of the locations identified by Safeguard Defenders, and carefully looked into these allegations to consider whether any laws have been broken and whether any further action should be taken. I can confirm that they have not, to date, identified any evidence of illegal activity on behalf of the Chinese state across these sites. We assess that police and public scrutiny have had a suppressive impact on any administrative functions that these sites may have had.

However, these “police service stations” were established without our permission and their presence, regardless of whatever low-level administrative activity they were performing, will have worried and intimidated those who have left China and sought safety and freedom here in the UK. This is unacceptable.

The Chinese authorities regularly criticise others for what they see as interference in their internal affairs, yet they felt able to open unattributed sites without consulting the UK Government. It is alleged that this was a pattern repeated around the world.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has told the Chinese embassy that any functions related to such “police service stations” in the UK are unacceptable and that they must not operate in any form. The Chinese embassy has subsequently responded that all such stations have closed permanently. Any further allegations will be swiftly investigated, in line with UK law.

I hope that this clarifies what we know about these alleged “police service stations” and the action that we have taken. The 2023 Integrated Review Refresh makes it clear that we want to engage and partner with China on key issues where it is in our national interest to do so. However, the UK will always put national security first.

Let me be clear: any attempt by any foreign power to intimidate, harass or harm individuals or communities in the UK will not be tolerated. This is an insidious threat to our democracy and fundamental human rights.

That is why I asked the Defending Democracy Taskforce to review the UK’s approach to trans-national repression to ensure that we have a robust and joined-up response across Government and law enforcement. Understanding and combating this kind of interference is a key pillar of our taskforce’s efforts.

The National Security Bill, now in its final stages, represents the biggest overhaul of state threats legislation in a generation, and will drastically improve our tools to deal with the full range of state threat activity, regardless of where it originates. The Bill contains provisions that will leave those seeking to coerce, including through threats of violence, for, or with the intention to benefit, a foreign state liable to prosecution in a way that they currently are not. Those convicted could face up to 14 years in prison. I urge Parliament to quickly pass the Bill so that its powers can be used to clamp down on foreign interference and trans-national repression.

I look forward to working closely with this House to further protect our democracy.

[HCWS822]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Update

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Chris Heaton-Harris): Section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act 2019 (“the NIEF Act”) places me under a legal duty to ensure that the recommendations in paragraphs 85 and 86 of the 2018 report of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (“the CEDAW report”) are implemented in full.

I have today laid regulations in Parliament to implement the CEDAW recommendation to

“make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion in Northern Ireland, and monitor its implementation”.

The regulations will mirror the approach taken in England with regard to education about the prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion. This is provided for in regulation 2(2).

It has always been my preference that, as a devolved matter, the Department of Education in Northern Ireland updates the curriculum. However, nearly four years have passed since the NIEF Act, and adolescents in Northern Ireland are still not receiving comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Today, I am therefore laying regulations that:

Amend the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006, and the Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 for adolescents, to make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents.

Place a duty on the Department of Education to issue guidance, by 1 January 2024, on the content and delivery of the education required to be provided.

Place a duty on the board of governors and principal of every grant-aided school to have regard to this guidance.

Place a duty on the Department of Education to publish a report by 1 September 2026 on the implementation of education on sexual and reproductive health and rights in grant-aided schools, and lay the report before the Assembly.

I recognise the sensitivity of this topic and that some parents may wish to teach their child about sex education themselves, or make alternative arrangements for sex education to be provided in line with their religious or other beliefs. In recognition of this, the regulations also place a duty on the Department of Education to introduce a mechanism to ensure that a pupil may be withdrawn from education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, or elements of that education, at the request of a parent. This follows the approach taken in England and Scotland.

Consultation with parents on relationship and sexuality education is already common practice in Northern Ireland and we expect the Department of Education to ensure schools afford parents the opportunity to review relevant materials.

I wish to be clear that educating adolescents on issues such as contraception, and access to abortion in Northern Ireland, should be done in a factual way that does not advocate, or oppose, a particular view on the moral and ethical considerations of abortion or contraception.

While the changes to the curriculum will come into effect from 1 July 2023, there will be a period of implementation and a need for meaningful engagement with teachers, parents and young people. To allow for this, the regulations place a duty on the Department of Education to issue guidance on the content and delivery of the required education by 1 January 2024.

[HCWS824]

Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022: Implementation

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): During the passage of the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, the Government committed to provide updates to Parliament on the implementation of the Act every six months from commencement. I am pleased to share the first such update today.

The Act received Royal Assent on 6 December 2022, upon which part 3 of the Act came into force. Since the passage of the Act, the Government have worked closely with the relevant Northern Ireland Departments on its implementation.

On 22 May, the Government made the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 (Commencement) Regulations 2023. This brought into force the provision of the Act for the purposes of establishing the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression, the Irish Language Commissioner and the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British Tradition. This also brought into force the concurrent powers and powers of direction of the Secretary of State in relation to the Act.

In the Government's view, the Act provides a framework for all of Northern Ireland's identities, languages and cultures to be accommodated, protected and respected. This includes those who define themselves as "other" and those who form Northern Ireland's ethnic and newcomer communities, consistent with the vision set out in New Decade, New Approach.

For these reasons, the Government remain committed to seeing the implementation of these New Decade, New Approach undertakings and will continue to work closely with Northern Ireland Departments on these matters. The Government will also continue to keep Parliament updated, in line with the assurances that we have made.

[HCWS823]

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